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8-9 campus floated as way to reduce school overcrowding

By JULIA MARTINEZ staff writers Jan 21, 2017

A planning committee tasked with prioritizing the Ellensburg School District's 40-year plan heard an idea from Lincoln Elementary School principal John Graf that would call for moving grades 8-9 to a portable city adjacent to the high school.

The move would free up classroom space in the district's elementary schools, which would become K-4. The renovated Morgan Middle School would open in 2018 as a 5-7 school, and the high school would be for grades 10-12. The 8-9 campus would share facilities such as classrooms and the library with the high schoolers.

The idea, which would move the district from a three-transition to a four-transition district, is something that Graf said is "built out of necessity."

"We're significantly beyond our capacity," he said about Lincoln Elementary School.

The Community Capital Planning Committee, which will offer a recommendation to the Ellensburg School Board on how to prioritize and fund upcoming capital projects, heard Graf's idea at their first meeting in January. Another discussion was slated for Wednesday, but was canceled because of the ice storm.

The district and the board will respond to the CCPC's recommendation when it makes its way to the board. Two school board members, Curtis Bull and Jonathan Leonard, sit on the committee. Superintendent Paul Farris is also a committee member.

The committee made it clear that relieving overcrowding at the elementary levels is a priority after participating in a small group discussion at the Jan. 4 meeting. Anonymous comment cards were passed around to members and categorized based on their ideas, with a total of nine cards being categorized under concern for class sizes.

Increased class sizes

Increased enrollment throughout the district, particularly at the elementary school level, has led to the use of more portable classrooms. There are three portables, each with two classrooms, at every elementary school. Mount Stuart also houses a modular building with four classrooms.

As a way to keep local tax rates stabilized, the district in its 40-year plan anticipated going out for a bond in 2021 for a new elementary school. The high school bond would be paid by that time and the new bond would essentially replace it. The district had thought it could pursue a bond in 2020, but an unpredictable bond market thwarted that plan.

In 2015, the overall district tax rate was \$4.58 per \$1,000 of assessed property value, and grew to \$5.37 in 2016. Rates will reach their highest this year at \$5.78 because of the roll out of the technology levy. The rates will drop to \$5.36 in 2018 and will continue at that level until they drop to \$4.95 in 2036, assuming an elementary school bond is approved in 2021.

Funding the idea

The district's business manager, Farley Walker, put together a rough \$3.2 million cost estimate of the 8-9 campus idea. The estimate, he pointed out, is based on a plan that is not fully developed and does not include some major aspects of Graf's idea, such as converting the district office into a

main office, building a new central office, and relocating the high school soccer field. Additional costs, Walker said in an email, would be likely. The plan would be funded through a capital levy or bond.

The district only has 12 portables available, and Walker said their best location would be at the soccer field; Graf had originally considered relocating only eight portables to the area near the apple trees outside of the library. Breezeways would have to be installed between the portables for students.

Graf said the 8-9 students could share the library, commons, band and choir rooms, and vocational classrooms with the high schoolers. It could also open up some opportunities for eighth graders to take classes that were not offered or available at the middle school.

Moving from the three-transition system could be an option for the district, Graf said, and is one that has been implemented in neighboring districts like Selah and West Valley.

The idea could also be short term as a way to relieve the class size pressure at the elementary level, or could be a long-term solution if the community decides it wants to fund an 8-9 campus along with a fourth elementary school.

“Sooner than later”

This school year Graf said he has had to use three classroom spaces that had not been used as classrooms prior, along with six classrooms provided by three portables.

Lincoln's infrastructure, he said, is built on a capacity of around 350 students. With portable classrooms that number jumps to more than 500 and puts stress on the core of the building. The cafeteria and gym are beyond capacity, he said, and more specialists have been added to handle the growing number of students. Similar problems have popped up in other elementary schools that also are at capacity.

Graf said he does not know how else the district will address overcrowding without a fourth elementary school, and that the problem will be much more significant before its completed. If a bond for an elementary school is passed by voters in 2021, the earliest estimate for when a school could be completed is in 2025.

His idea has drawbacks, Graf said. Parents of eighth grade students will “see something different than expected.”

“Since (the Morgan) bond was passed, we have seen significant growth, and we have to look critically at school enrollment,” he said.

The idea would be less than ideal for those students, he said, but grouping together 8-9 graders can have a positive outcome.

“I’ve seen all ages. From my perspective, eighth and ninth graders are similar creatures,” he said.

Freshmen and seniors are at different stages of their lives, he said. The open campus would also be limited to only 10-12, eliminating the off-campus lunch privilege for freshmen.

“There’s an awful lot of planning to be done,” he said about the idea.

Passing times would have to be coordinated between the two campuses, as would curriculum for ninth-graders working toward their high school credits.

Graf’s first choice, though, is running a bond for a new elementary school at the earliest opportunity, sooner rather than later.

The CPCC will discuss the idea and other questions at its next meeting at 5:30 p.m. on Feb. 1 at Hal Holmes. Comments from observers are scheduled for 6:30 p.m.

The idea

All elementary schools would be converted to K-4

Morgan Middle School would open after its remodel is completed in 2018 as a 5-7 campus

Portables at the elementary schools would be moved adjacent to the high school

The portables would house the 8-9 grades

The high school would be a 10-12 campus and would share some classroom space, the library and the gym

The district office would be converted into a main office for the 8-9 campus

Julia Martinez