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Ellensburg school committee drops 8-9 campus idea

By JULIA MARTINEZ staff writer Feb 3, 2017

A planning committee tasked with prioritizing upcoming capital projects in the Ellensburg School District on Wednesday dropped an 8-9 campus idea as a way to resolve student overcrowding in the district.

The proposal would have set up a new 8-9 campus adjacent to Ellensburg High School using portable classrooms. The high school would be grades 10-12. Elementary schools would be K-4, the middle school would turn into grades 5-7.

Lincoln Elementary School Principal John Graf proposed turning the district's three-transition system, with students attending three different schools from elementary, middle school and high school, into a four-transition system.

Graf said the idea was "out of necessity" and he preferred to go out for an elementary school bond sooner rather than later. The district has slated in its 40-year facilities plan to go out for a bond in 2021.

An idea to run a bond for a new elementary school in spring 2018 was the most popular idea, receiving more than a third of the vote.

Community concerns

The Community Capital Project Committee broke up into four different groups and presented some options on tackling overcrowding in the school district.

“These are options. These are not decisions, these are not even recommendations, these are options,” group facilitator Linda Waters said.

Before the groups presented their ideas after brainstorming in smaller groups, several community members had the opportunity to voice their concerns to the committee.

Lori Leach, an eighth-grade math teacher for more than 20 years in the district, said she was completely opposed to the idea of an 8-9 portable campus. The eighth-graders currently in the high school, she said, are already sharing facilities with high school students. Adding portables would only mean that students would be walking back and forth from the campus to the high school.

“The middle school hasn’t been treated well,” she said. “I know we’re busting at the seams.”

She had no opposition to an 8-9 campus if it was a school, not portables. Eighth-grade students need to be together to have sense of belonging, she said, since that age is the most influential. Students would not feel as if they belonged to the high school, and would not feel as if they belonged to the middle school either. With an 8-9 campus, she said, the eighth-graders would have no sense of pride or belonging.

“Those eighth-graders have nothing if you do that,” she said.

Parent Liz Ritzenthaler also said she was opposed to an 8-9 campus.

“Elementary communities and traditions hold value and promises for growth and stability,” she said. “Middle school offers transition, and this population has been denied and disrupted and shuffled to the high school already in a move that was meant to turn heads and increase pressure for bond passage.”

Ritzenthaler said that it seemed more reasonable to spread the burden of overcrowding across the district, so all buildings are at the same level of overcapacity.

“Force the issue of the need for revising elementary space,” she said.

Options

Ideas presented were later voted on by using dot stickers in an attempt to narrow down the committee's focus on various options. Each committee member and observers were given four dots.

The most popular idea, running a bond as soon as possible, received 21 committee votes out of a total 56. It also received four observer votes. This option would maintain the status quo throughout the district regarding the number of portables while a new school is in construction.

Some of the other popular options included building a dedicated developmental preschool and kindergarten, which would turn elementary schools into grades 1-5. Another idea was to involve Central Washington University in the process of solving the overcrowding issue by integrating some elementary or preschool classes on campus. The district's developmental preschool currently is in CWU's Psychology Building.

Another option was to begin planning the construction of a new elementary school so when the district runs a bond in 2021, plans are ready to go. Others placed their stickers on running a bond as early as 2018.

A common issue, however, is where a new school would go, regardless of whether it is an elementary or a developmental preschool-kindergarten building. Some options include building a "mega-school" in front of Mount Stuart and then knocking the school down because of some previous land grant restrictions limiting the amount of additional classroom space.

An option chosen solely by observers, with no committee dot stickers, was to figure out how to increase facility spaces on all existing buildings.

The option to consider a four-transition system received no dots, and was unanimously voted to be taken out of consideration in further discussions.

Meg Ludlum, a former school board member, asked if the committee could answer questions as to why portables were considered a security issue, and why enrollment increases are happening throughout the district.

Community member and parent Matthew Cziske also asked for clarification on where the committee was drawing its numbers for its capital plan, such as specific graduation rates, birth rates or growth rates. He's also wondering what steps the district is taking to put away funding to meet future facility needs.

Cziske also said there should be a better mechanism for the committee to disseminate information to the public, something he's not seeing taking place.

The next CCPC meeting is scheduled for 5:30 to 8 p.m. Feb. 15 at Ellensburg High School. The observer comment period begins at 6:30 p.m. The next Ellensburg School Board meeting is at 7 p.m. Feb. 8 at Ellensburg City Hall.

Julia Martinez