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Community members help brainstorm ideas for school overcrowding fix

By JULIA MARTINEZ staff writer Feb 20, 2017



More than 20 community members showed up to the Community Capital Planning Committee meeting on Feb. 15 at Valley View Elementary to collaborate with members on how to fix an elementary overcrowding problem.

Julia Martinez / Daily Record

In its most popular meeting yet, an Ellensburg School District committee that's looking at long-term plans for school facilities heard more than a half hour's worth of public comment in the Valley View Elementary cafeteria.

The Community Capital Planning Committee is tasked with prioritizing the district's 40-year plan and providing a recommendation to the Ellensburg School Board. Currently, the board has been meeting every other week in small groups to brainstorm ideas for how to fix the district's overcrowding

problem at the elementary level. The ideas are not suggestions or recommendations at this point, only ideas that will later be fleshed out to include more information if they are chosen by the committee to move forward.

Throughout the meeting, community members, teachers and staff touched on a variety of topics with most having one thing in common: an urgency to fix the overcrowding problem throughout the district.

More than 20 people showed up to the meeting. It was streamed live on the district's Facebook page, drawing viewers and comments that were later read aloud as part of the public comment session.

"The more input, the better this committee has a chance to make a good recommendation to the board, and the easier it'll be for the board to act on that," group facilitator Linda Waters said.

Observers later joined small group discussions with committee members and offered their ideas for fixing the overcrowding issue.

Public comment

Former school board member Meg Ludlum discussed the numbers the district is using to project future enrollment and population increases in the city. Other concerns dealt with the ultimate goal of the committee: to prioritize the 40-year plan, not just what committee member Jeff Slothower called "an acute problem."

Community member Matthew Cziske said he wanted to know other district goals that need to be met.

“What I’d hate to see is that in the future we end up in the same spot we are today,” he said. Are local tax resources and revenues, he asked, enough to support future growth in the area?

The last meeting drew support for running a bond in spring 2018, an idea that Slothower is not sold on because of “repeating mistakes on some of our bonds.”

“I think the focus should really be on setting this up so that when it is appropriate to run a bond that it runs in such a way that we don’t have to run it multiple times,” he said.

Unintended consequences, he said, from rushing a bond might make the problem worse. With no place to put a new school, and no idea on what it would look like or how much it would cost, Slothower said a bond would be a mistake.

“And I’m not going to support that,” he said.

The committee operates on a consensus, so if one person is opposed to a final recommendation the committee must re-evaluate the suggestion to the school board.

A lot of the ideas brought up, Slothower said, “seem kind of pie in the sky.”

“We need to sift these (ideas) out so we stop spinning our wheels and focus really on a short-term solution and then get down to the nuts and bolts of making some sort of a recommendation on a new elementary school,” he said.

Crowded schools

Several teachers said while they did not have a solution, crowded classrooms are an issue.

Tonieka Kokjer, a fourth-grade teacher at Mount Stuart, told the committee that her students have to step over each other every day.

“I can’t do it anymore. I mean I will, but it’s not working,” she said. “It’s hard, it’s tough, and you just keep piling it on, we got to figure something out.”

Another teacher at Valley View, Katrina Durham, also offered no suggestions. With 31 students in her fourth grade class, she boasts the largest class size in the district.

“It’s not really a thing to brag about,” she said.

She’s never worked harder in her life and feels more overwhelmed than ever, she said. Each of her students is different, she said, and meeting the needs of each one is difficult.

“I don’t know the solution, I just wanted to express that something needs to change,” she said. “I can’t expect my students to be their best self if I’m not my best self.”

Burning out and looking for another career is a point she would “hate to get to.”

Cynthia Hilburn, fifth-grade teacher at Mount Stuart, recalled having a conversation with Principal Dan Patton about class sizes. Patton told her, she said, that the district will step up to do what it can.

“I trust Paul Farris and the board and the community members here because I see amazing things happening with our kids, with our students, with my students,” she said. “I trust you. Just hurry up, please.”

A Mount Stuart specialist, Heather Burnham, said she has 23 kindergarteners coming into her room and wonders how many more there are going to be in the future.

“I just feel like meeting the kids where they need to be met cannot happen in that environment no matter how amazing our teachers are,” she said. “Something needs to be changed here soon.”

The Lincoln Parent Council canceled a meeting to attend the discussion, extending thanks to the district for setting up a committee to address the issue.

Committee positions

Members of the committee offered their own takes on the issue, with Ken Briggs saying the district is in crisis now.

“I’m just, more than ever, fired up that we got to fire up this community, and raise the consciousness level regarding the crisis we’re currently in and the crisis we’re going to be in if we don’t act on this now,” he said.

Treading water, he said, would lead to more problems. He would like to make a bond happen as soon as possible.

Micah Brunner said an interim solution also needs to be in the works.

“What needs to happen needs to happen soon, the bond needs to happen quick, but we need to figure something out in the meanwhile as well,” he said.

Katie Haberman, a volunteer at Valley View, said she sees the problem at the school.

“Working in the school, just seeing the kids scrunched at a lunch table, scrunched on the playground, scrunched in their classroom, they’re not used to being sardines, it just causes a lot of problems,” she said.

For Jennifer Hoyt, who worked on the Morgan Middle School bond, getting public support for a new bond without first paying off the current high school bond makes her nervous.

She wants to focus on an interim solution, either by putting students at Central Washington University or increasing the parent partnership program.

New ideas

After the comment period, the public joined the committee brainstorm with four separate groups having discussions.

Their ideas culminated with a list of proposed solutions, none of which were voted on.

Some ideas include running a bond as soon as possible, renting another building to relieve overcrowding, building a “mega-school” in front of Mount Stuart and other ideas involving the school, changing district boundaries and seeing if Thorp School District can absorb some students, and

plenty of other ideas.

The full list, and all committee materials, can be found at: <http://www.esd401.org/community/capital-planning>.

Superintendent Paul Farris said that when the committee has one or two proposals, a ThoughtExchange survey will be posted for community members to provide their input.

Farris said he'd like to begin the ThoughtExchange in April or May, but would ultimately like to have it prior to school being out.

"I don't want this process to be rushed," he said.

The next CCPC meeting will be March 1 at 5:30 p.m. at Hal Holmes. The Ellensburg School Board will meet Wednesday at 7 p.m. at Hal Holmes.

Julia Martinez