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TOP STORY

School board, committee discuss possible solutions to crowding

By JULIA MORENO staff writer May 31, 2017



Ellensburg School Board member Jennifer Hackett, center, discusses committee recommendations for a new elementary school Tuesday at Valley View Elementary School. The board didn't make a decision.

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A community committee presented its top ideas to relieve student overcrowding to the Ellensburg School Board on Tuesday night, but also said there still might be other, better solutions.

The committee, called the Community Capital Planning Committee, or CCPC, met for several months to make recommendations about school facility planning. School board members listened to the ideas, but didn't make a decision Tuesday.

Committee members presented two final options to the board. The first, Option B, would build a fourth elementary school and modernize Lincoln Elementary School at a cost of \$50.2 million.

A second option, or Option K, would build a fourth elementary school for grades 1-5 and a developmental preschool and kindergarten for 350 students. Additionally, there would be minimal modernization to Lincoln. The cost is \$58.6 million.

John Graf, principal of Lincoln Elementary and CCPC member, said he recently gave a talk to fifth-graders in a portable classroom, and it was so crowded he couldn't wait to leave.

"I do not see how teachers maintain their sanity in portables," he said. "The students feel disconnected. One of the things this committee strongly felt was that as we started floating these different options that the ultimate goal is to get the classrooms in brick and mortar and not allow our students in a portable. We feel really strongly about that."

The CCPC recommended the school board adopt a target elementary school size of 500 students. Currently, Lincoln has 516 students, Mount Stuart Elementary has 506 and Valley View has 532. The optimal class size recommendation is 19 students for kindergarten through third grade and 25 students from fourth to fifth grade.

"We had three options for what we could say is a classroom size," said Jonathan Leonard, who served on the committee and is a school board member. "We chose the most conservative, being 19 and 25 because we believe the community would also support that size."

PROS AND CONS

The CCPC outlined pros and cons of each option in a document given to the ESD board. The pros for Option B are: it modernizes Lincoln; provides surge space for Lincoln students during modernization; allows time to deal with the issues at Mount Stuart Elementary School; and can handle enrollment projections.

Some of the cons included: it only solves the problems of overcrowding at Lincoln and the new elementary school, but doesn't move students out of portables. There would be a request for a bond, and it would provide less capacity than some other options. It could be seen as misleading to taxpayers as "solving the problem."

"We have 512 students in our elementary schools. If we modernize Lincoln without building new space on Lincoln, which is what this plan is," Graf said. "You're back down to a capacity of 350, so then there's nearly a couple of hundred students extra."

Graf said the fourth elementary school would serve as a space for the Lincoln Elementary students while the building is being remodeled, and the portion of those students would be moved back to Lincoln after it's been modernized.

The pros for Option K include: the most new seats and an additional gymnasium. It would build a pre-kindergarten and kindergarten building and give more swing space for students while the remodel of Lincoln is happening. There's already district-owned property near Valley View to build the pre-K/K building and it would be built to be expandable. A pre-k-k building would have room for special staff.

School districts are required to provide developmental preschool services to children with special needs. The district's current developmental preschool is at Central Washington University.

Some of the cons are: more traffic because the property would be near Valley View and Ellensburg High School. It would result in "minimal" modernization of Lincoln and it's not clear what that means. And it is the highest total cost to taxpayers.

PORTABLES

Jennifer Hackett, ESD board member, asked if under the Option K there would still be portables.

“You said one of your goals was all brick and mortars, but obviously that’s challenging,” she said.

“The way we talked about the portables is not that we’re going to instantly take all the portables and burn them,” Leonard said. “It was more of getting away from using them as general classrooms and putting specialists in them. Using them for storage, things like that.”

Hackett said she liked that instead because it’s expensive to move portables and she “hates to see kids in them” but on the other hand she’s “scared to see anything that leaves us having to go out and get new portables in a couple of years because we no longer have the ones we were using.”

During public comment, community member Pat Kelleher suggested it might be more cost effective to build a new school to replace Lincoln instead of modernizing it. The district could use the Lincoln building for other educational purposes, he said.

POPULATION GROWTH

Kittitas County gained 1,809 people between 2015 to 2016, raising the population to 44,866. The roughly 4.2 percent growth rate made it the 10th fastest growing county in the U.S. by percentage in 2015-16, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Graf said it sounds like the sky is falling when people talk about projected growth and school crowding, but it’s a good problem to have.

More people are choosing to live in Ellensburg with their families. Technology and I-90 improvements are allowing people to commute and telecommute for work, he said.

“The reason we’re having these problems is people want to live in Ellensburg,” he said. “We live in a great space. We have fantastic community, a fantastic school district.”

Enrollment forecasts

Meg Ludlum, former Ellensburg School Board member who is running unopposed for an open seat this fall, discussed a student enrollment forecast she prepared for the facilities committee.

- In 2025, a low for elementary grades (K-5) would be 1,860 students, with a high of 2,185.
- For the middle school (6-8) a predicted low number would be 930 students and a high number of 1,040.
- And the high school (9-12) a low is 1,205 students and a high of 1,205 because the kindergarten surge doesn't make an impact until 2026.

In 2016, the elementary school had 1,550 students, the middle school had 750 and the high school had 1,000.

Other recommendations

Some of the other recommendations from the Ellensburg School District's Community Capital Planning Committee:

- The eighth grade should not be kept at the high school longer than necessary depending on whichever plan is eventually adopted by the Ellensburg School Board.
- The property for the new elementary school is identified, "locked-in," and possibly purchased prior to running a bond.
- The district should start the process of clearing up Mount Stuart property issues. The district cannot build on most of the property surrounding the school because of restrictions in a state grant from the 1960s.

The CCPC was formed to prioritize projects in the district's 40-year facilities plan. The panel used a consensus decision-making process, and each member of the committee had to agree before the committee moved forward on an issue. In the last meeting, the committee reached consensus on recommending a bond in February 2019.

Julia Moreno