

School Board Approves Redistricting Plan

No One Comments At Final Public Hearing On Revision

By ERIN FLYNN Daily News-Record

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HARRISONBURG — Silence.

That's what the City Council chambers in Harrisonburg City Hall was filled with Tuesday night.

Outgoing School Board Chairwoman Kerri Wilson had just asked if anyone was interested in speaking at the final public hearing regarding the division's proposed redistricting plan.

Unlike the previous two public hearings, no one rose to their feet.

"The fact that no one was here tonight for public hearing, I think it's a pretty good sign that we did a good job, and that took a lot of people ... to get to this place," said board member Brent Holsinger.

Since February, a 20-member advisory committee tasked with creating Harrisonburg City Public Schools' new attendance boundaries has been established, and various scenarios have been considered by the committee and board.

The division must change its attendance boundaries to accommodate its new \$25.9 million school, Bluestone Elementary School, which will open on Garbers Church Road next fall for up to 750 students.

Bluestone's construction is part of HCPS' ongoing effort to ease overcrowding in the division.

"It took several months, but I thought it was a really good example of local government working," said outgoing board member Tom Domonoske.

On Tuesday, the board approved a revised redistricting plan after hearing no opposition from parents, students or community members.

Wilson, Domonoske, Holsinger and board members Andy Kohen and Nick Swayne voted in favor of what they call scenario 7A, which features some tweaks to scenario 7, a plan presented at Nov. 1's meeting. Board member Lauren Berry Penrod, who took office this month, abstained from the vote.

In 7A, the boundary line for Keister and Stone Spring elementary schools moved from Interstate 81 to Neff Avenue.

Another change was keeping students living between Neff Avenue and Port Republic Road at Stone Spring. If scenario 7 had been approved, those students would have attended Keister.

The adjustment, Superintendent Scott Kizner said, would prevent the buses from driving past James Madison University's campus.

"It can be very congested," he said.

With the opening of Bluestone, fifth-graders will remain at their elementary schools instead of advancing to the middle schools.

Some rising fifth-grade students who would attend Thomas Harrison Middle School will go to Bluestone, unless they have permission to stay at their current school.

Because Bluestone is being built on the western part of the city, the students affected by the redistricting process will be shifted in that direction, Kizner said.

Most of Bluestone's future students now attend Keister Elementary. Students from Waterman and Spotswood will take the place of former Keister students.

Families who have children who will attend Bluestone for its dual-language program and also have a rising kindergartner slated to attend Keister, Kizner said, can request for the kindergartner to attend Bluestone.

"I think it's reasonable not splitting families up," he said.

With the board's decision set, the work is about to kick in for the division's administration.

"The School Board met the timeline, which we were really happy about, but now we, in many ways, have the more challenging work because we have to put the plan in place," Kizner said.

In other business at Tuesday's meeting, the board received an update on Bluestone's construction.

Craig Mackail, assistant superintendent of operations and school safety, said most of the steel is up and the concrete floors should be finished in the next couple of weeks.

The classroom partitions are also being set up, and roofing is underway.

"It'll be difficult to tell unless you're actually on site," he said Wednesday.

Electrical and plumbing work has also begun.

For now, Mackail said, everything is smooth sailing.

“We’re hoping for good weather. That will keep the construction process going,” he said.
“We’re moving right along.”