

Second High School Option Gets Pushback

Group Calls Into Question Wisdom Of Building New School

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HARRISONBURG — Tuesday night's meeting of the Harrisonburg City School Board, overwhelmingly focused on how to address the overcrowding at Harrisonburg High School, became a classic civic confrontation.

A consultant presented the board with the estimated price of building a second high school — between \$88 million and \$100 million — not including land costs, and only if it were built now.

Another advisory company hired by the board said the city could handle the additional bond debt needed without unduly adversely affecting its fiscal health, adding that a real property tax increase of 17.5 cents per \$100 of valuation could repay the debt over 25 to 30 years.

About a dozen naysayers — largely absent up to that point from the board's month-long decision-making process, — ignored those figures. They argued the impact of a tax hike would be greater than portrayed and presented their own solution to the quandary at HHS: 1,750 students attending a facility that accommodated 1,360 when it opened in 2005.

And, last, after the public comment period expired, many of the board's six members said they were sympathetic to homeowners on a budget. But they disputed the findings of the protesters, drawing angry — and technically out-of-order — responses from that section of the gallery.

The existing high school cost around \$41 million to build. Laura Logie, an ardent local Republican activist and campaigner, led off the handful of people who spoke at the podium Tuesday against building a second high school. "If they build this new high school, which is \$100 million, our taxes would go up \$1,000 a year, which is \$83 a month. I can't afford that," said Logie, who noted that she is on a fixed income.

A new high school costing \$100 million is in keeping with a report given earlier in the meeting by VMDO Architects of Charlottesville, which had been contracted by the board to develop the cost estimate.

But otherwise, Logie's assertions contradicted a financial report presented earlier to the board by Davenport & Co., and defied the realities of math, said several board members and Harrisonburg Schools Superintendent Scott Kizner.

That did not go over well with the naysayers, who continued to speak and approach the dais with sheets of paper despite the admonitions of board Chairman Andrew Kohen.

The 17.5-cent increase would take the rate from 85 cents per \$100 in valuation to \$1.02.5 per \$100.

Logie's home is valued for city taxation purposes at \$196,000, according to publicly available property records. A 17.5-cent hike would increase her annual tax bill by \$343, from \$1,666 to \$2,009. Under that scenario, she'd end up paying about \$28.60 more a month than she does now.

In addition to its opposition to a new school, the protesters offered their own solution: Reconfigure the high school to be for students in grades 10 through 12, putting ninth-graders in with middle-schoolers. The student body at HHS would drop by approximately a quarter, they said.

On Wednesday, Kizner said that option was considered and rejected as largely impractical. Harrisonburg City Public Schools' two middle schools are on course to be at capacity by 2018-19, and, he said, that scenario would be expensive to operate and not be good for the education of children.

"Instruction is not designed in those grade configurations," Kizner said. "It would be very expensive operationally. Do we want 11-year-olds with 15 to 16-year-olds?"

On Tuesday night, the board also heard from the division's High School

Space Committee, a 25-member advisory group empaneled in mid-March. The committee unanimously endorsed a new high school over two other options, including a separate annex at or near HHS, or an addition to the current building.

Each of the two other options would cost about half of the new school, but also would accommodate significantly fewer students.

The School Board will not make a formal decision until June 6 and will meet with Harrisonburg City Council about the issue on June 8. Only council can decide to issue bonds and expend money.

Council has not signaled how it might vote.

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