

School Board To Get New Building Cost

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HARRISONBURG — The Harrisonburg City School Board will talk, again, about building a second high school as the best of three options to fix overcrowding at the existing school.

But with three helpings of fresh meat added to those old bones, Tuesday night's board meeting in City Hall's Council Chambers looks like a mouthful.

VMDO Architects of Charlottesville is scheduled to present an up-to-date estimate on the cost to build a second high school. A new school emerged as a favorite on the part of division leaders from among three options the division is considering to resolve overcrowding at Harrisonburg High School.

A 25- member advisory High School Space Study Committee also will formally present its recommendation — a new school — to the board on Tuesday. The public will be allowed to comment on the committee's rationale for spurning the two other options: an addition to Harrisonburg High School or an annex next to the 2005 Garbers Church Road facility.

Harrisonburg High School was designed for 1,360 students and now has around 1,750. An outdated estimate for the cost to build a second high school was around \$ 100 million. VMDO received a \$ 40,000 contract in late March to determine a better estimate for a new school. Previously, Moseley Architects of Harrisonburg estimated an annex, a separate building on the existing campus, would cost between \$ 48.3 million and \$ 55.8 million. An addition would cost \$ 45.1 million to \$ 51.4 million, Moseley estimated. VMDO's estimate will not include the price of land, which could be an expense key to a new high school's location.

The space committee, comprising Harrisonburg City Public Schools stakeholders such as parents, teachers, administrators and business leaders, made its endorsement for a new high school with a unanimous vote May 4.

On Thursday, the committee hosted an open house at HHS, with the purpose of presenting the public with information on why it recommended building a new school.

In its announcement, the space committee said a second school was the only option that could keep pace with the expected growth in high school- age students.

The Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville projects 2,500 to 2,600 high school students will be in the city by the 2023- 24 school year.

If the second high school is built with room for 1,360, the division could accommodate 2,720 high school students combined.

Based on the projections, the only way the division could accommodate that many with an annex or addition — each of which could hold 800 students — would be to keep HHS as overcrowded then as today, according to the committee.

With a recommendation in hand, and an updated cost analysis, the board will hear a presentation from Davenport & Co., the division's financial adviser, on how to pay for the building. The money would be raised by bonded debt, which likely would be paid for through an increase in real property taxes.

Although Harrisonburg City Council will make the ultimate decision on issuing any bonds and raising any taxes, School Board member Deb Fitzgerald on Sunday said the board must be clear on what it's asking of the city.

“ This whole process is going to be an ongoing partnership for a number of years. Just as City Council will need to deal with educational issues not strictly in their wheelhouse, the School Board will have to be just as informed about the financial issues.

“ It is,” Fitzgerald said, “ a huge decision.”

Although Tuesday's meeting, which begins at 7 p.m. at 409 S. Main St., is a big one, bigger ones await.

On June 6, the School Board, which is free to take or ignore the space committee's advice, will vote on its choice.

On June 8, the board will present its choice to City Council during a special joint meeting.

For more information about the Harrisonburg High School overcrowding issue, go to harrisonburg.k12.va.us and look for the latest update in the “ Announcements” section along the far left side of the homepage.

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