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Tough choices ahead for grammar school group

By CONNIE KORBEL Of The Beacon -

The Grammar School Site Committee held a meeting for the Mendocino Unified School District community last Thursday evening to present the options being considered for improving the school site. The very light attendance was undoubtedly a disappointment for the district, but those who were present asked compelling questions and expressed informed opinions that managed to target nearly every aspect and position possible.

Tom Birdsell, a committee parent representative, set a neighborly tone when he declared he had been chosen to make the evening's presentation by way of the short straw.

Birdsell reported the committee has fully explored five options, keeping in mind the declining enrollment, site location and development, the number, size and amenities of classrooms.



Were trying to solve these issues so teachers can teach effectively. Im really hopeful that were going to make a really good recommendation to the school board to benefit our kids of today and tomorrow, he told the group.

Of the five options the committee has determined that three wont work. The other two would work, but now the question is, which will the community support.

Option: Build a new campus at the HEART property

This 20-acre parcel, south of the existing campus, will eventually be developed with six to 10 acres turned over to the school for a construction site and right-away access. Birdsell said, Without owning it, it would be wise not to build on it.



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Pros:

- A brand new school on a great site

Cons:

- Delayed time frame would have to reapply for state funds and would be eligible for less money
- Very expensive site
- May never acquire the property
- May lose state funding due to a separate parcel site
- Size and location unknowns
- Cost prohibitive
- Great idea; bad timing
- Separate from the middle school

Option: Remodel and add to the old grammar school in town

Pros:

- Moves students into town: Birdsell said, There's lots of sentiment in town for this.
- Uses a historical school

Cons:

- Huge expense to upgrade to present day codes
- Not enough space
- Not a K-8 campus loses the opportunity to share resources
- Loses state funding
- Removes Parks and Recreation from town

Option: Increase capacity of satellite schools expand the K-3 schools to K-5, or other, to fit more grades within existing under-utilized buildings. Example was Albion School has a capacity for 60 students, but currently has only 15 attending.

Pros:

- Uses existing schools more efficiently
- Would need to build fewer classrooms

Cons:

- Increased transportation costs and schedules

- Offers very limited programs

- No shared resources

Birdsell summarized the three options by saying, Each has a little bit of merit, but there are some major problems.

There are two options the committee is seriously considering and presented to the community as viable.

Option: Save the center (location of the multi-purpose room) of the grammar school and build some new buildings for a K-8 campus

Pros:

- Very responsible and socially friendly recycling of a good building

- Most cost-effective solution

- Most time-efficient the quickest path to completion

- Emotional attachment to the center building

Cons:

- More of a challenge, but not impossible, to create a cohesive, unified K-8 campus.

- Reuses an older building

- Some community perception of throwing good money after bad

Superintendent Jim Shock said, It may not be the dream school, the ideal school, but it can be something that everybody can be proud of, if thats the option.

Option: Not to use any of the grammar school building, but use the middle school and build new classrooms

Pros:

- Build new, nearer to the middle school, for a better K-8 unified campus

- All new spaces

- Possible revenue for community use of the old school

- Free up the site for other long-term uses

- Perhaps public faith that the new buildings will last longer

Cons:

- Total cost is plus-or-minus 100 percent more than the other option

- Waste of existing structures

- Inefficient use of resources

- Higher financial burden to the community

Birdsell said that building a new facility, which does not restore to use the existing structures needing modernizing, will cost the district \$3 to \$4 million more.

New information indicates that the current 392 K-8 enrollment, which uses 26 classrooms, will decline to between 300 and 310 students within the next five to six years.

Architect Mark Quattrocchi reassured the audience that the middle school structural integrity is sound. It needs modernizing to new codes, a new roof and heating system. After 25 years, its tired, he explained.

Principal Bronwyn Rhoades addressed the questions about how much change is anticipated. She said there will be a gradual change in the infrastructure, but essentially you have a K-8 school now with about 100 yards between [them].

Quattrocchi answered the question about the time frame by stressing the state funding time-line is firm at 18 months. Construction can begin as soon as July 2006. He anticipates that with either option, construction would be completed within a few months of the other. The earliest move would be August 2007, with the latest in November.

Shock took the query about a bond measure. Given the amount of money coming from the state, the district will need to find the funding for its portion from somewhere. At this point I cant imagine a scenario where we could do it without a bond for at least a major portion of any of the options, but Im not ready to say that yes, theres going to be a bond.

Board member Rod Jones conveyed a personal insight. For me, when I hear about supporting a bond, its got to be not only something that logically makes dollars-and-cents wise, but something that also does strike the imagination of the community.

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