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Champaign considers how many high schools would be best

Mon, 05/23/2011 - 9:28pm | Jodi Heckel

CHAMPAIGN — The Champaign school board's discussion of whether to replace Central High School with a new building focused Monday on whether one, two or three high schools would be best for the district.

The board considered the pros and cons of four options, including having one high school with grades 10 through 12 and a separate 9th-grade center.

Some community members at the meeting said they were vehemently opposed to one high school. Laurie Andrews taught at one of the state's largest high schools.

"I think it's very easy for students to slip through the cracks," said Andrews, who has a second-grader in the district. "It's hard for teachers to get to know students. It's hard for students to get to know each other. Discipline problems multiply."

Parent Chuck Jackson said hearing that the academic achievement of disadvantaged students often suffers in larger high schools took the one-high-school option off the table for him.

"Those are the people who are going to get hurt by one school," he said, adding he's also concerned by the possibility of loss of community and parental involvement if the district went to one high school. "All those are the things that support our most vulnerable population."

But Mark Briggs, parent of a junior at Centennial High School and two Centennial graduates, believes one high school is the only choice. He says combining the two high schools would increase the academic and extracurricular offerings, allowing the district to offer more courses and additional sports and theater and music groups.

"One high school will be great for this community," he said.

Several board members said they favored two high schools, citing fewer opportunities for students to play sports or participate in other extracurricular activities with one high school, more difficulty in building relationships between teachers and students in a very large school, and more difficulty in dealing with discipline problems in a school where teachers won't know a large portion of the students.

Board member Tommy Lockman said the likelihood that Champaign would not be a member of the Big 12 conference with just one high school was a "huge problem," noting sports teams would have to travel much farther to compete against Chicago-area schools.

For board member Stig Lanesskog, "The diversity of our community is our greatest strength. How can we use our high schools to best leverage that strength ... and allow students to learn from each other?"

Lanesskog believes doing so requires two, rather than one, high school.

Central Principal Joe Williams said he favors two high schools, with a new Central building.

"Everything about Central is outstanding, except for the building," he said.

Centennial Principal Greg Johnson urged the district to look at research showing how students achieve at schools with different enrollment sizes, particularly low-income students.

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Anyone wanting to provide input can email the school board at u4boe@champaignschools.org.

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Location (3): Champaign County, Champaign, Local

Tags (4): Champaign School Board, Jodi Heckel, Champaign Central High School, Champaign Centennial High School

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the happy hacker wrote 18 hours 12 min ago #1

"Everything about Central is outstanding, except for the building."

teehee. Has he ever *been* in Central? Those students are, well, let's just say on the priority list academics falls only a few rungs below between smoking weed in the parking lot and trying not to get knocked up.

It's a juvee hall under a different name.

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Yatiri wrote 15 hours 20 min ago #2

I had to pull my kid out of Edison Middle School, and later Centennial, because of the bullying and fear. At Centennial the hallways and stairwells were controlled by thugs, not the teachers.

One very big school is a bad idea. I think smaller is better. The security and bullying situation can be better addressed that way.

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the happy hacker wrote 8 hours 12 min ago #3

I'm the happy hacker and I approved this message.

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nick wrote 8 hours 10 min ago #4

The comparison between Central and a Youth Detention Center is not entirely accurate. YDC centers have a more controlled environment with an emphasis on control of the population. Discipline is not such a priority at Central.

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PEguy wrote 7 hours 25 min ago

#5

Just take a look at the growth of Tolono, Mahomet, St. Joseph, and Monticello over the last 15 years. Do you think its because of their industries, jobs, or businesses?...NO...everyone that works in C-U wants their kids to go to good, safe schools, with a low crime rate.

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kmccor569 wrote 6 hours 48 min ago

#6

You couldn't pay me to send my children to any of the Champaign or Urbana schools. I will work 5 jobs if I have to just to be able to afford to live in one of the small towns around and send my children to a safe, small school.

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Champaign to discuss summer jobs program

Mon, 05/23/2011 - 9:00am | Patrick Wade

CHAMPAIGN — The city council this week will consider a proposal to establish a summer jobs program for Unit 4 students in June and July — a cooperative effort between the city and the school district to fill an employment gap that has existed for several years.

The council will need to act somewhat quickly if members want the program to be running before its planned start date of June 13. Council members gave initial support to the \$195,000 proposal last week, and they would be scheduled to grant formal approval next week after seeing the details this Tuesday.

The city council will meet on Tuesday at 7 p.m. in the Champaign City Building, 102 N. Neil St.

"This issue has been something that the community has continued to work on probably the last eight years," said Joan Walls, deputy city manager for community development. "It's a recurring theme, and we've also talked with students who have also shared that it's important to have these opportunities to learn job skills."

The summer jobs program would place as many as 150 Champaign students between the ages of 14 and 19 in a variety of positions. Walls said that could include jobs with the city, schools, university or community businesses.

The students would receive \$1,000 for the seven weeks of work they would be scheduled to complete between June 13 and July 29.

Recently, federal dollars that used to provide the funding for such programs in Champaign have dried up, and Walls said studies have shown a trend toward fewer jobs for teenagers.

The \$195,000 for the program would come out of the city's urban renewal fund, which typically pays for infrastructure improvements like those planned for the Beardsley Park and Bristol Park neighborhoods or for community development programs like CommUnity Matters, a youth programming initiative in the Garden Hills neighborhood.

Council members debated last week whether the summer jobs program is an appropriate use of urban renewal funds. They agreed that the employment program is necessary, but may revisit the issue to find a different source of money if officials wish to continue the program in the future.

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Sid Saltfork wrote 23 hours 49 min ago #1

Have an enrollment period for all kids that are eligible; followed by a lottery of all eligible for the 195 jobs. Have the drawing conducted, and supervised by the city council. Try to recruit more local employers to participate. Base eligibility on school attendance, and grades during the past school year along with the other criteria.

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Flag retirement ceremony scheduled in Urbana

Wed, 05/18/2011 - 11:00am | The News-Gazette

Urbana VFW Post 630, 1303 E. Main St., in conjunction with the Richard L. Pittman Marine Corps League 1231, will conduct a flag retirement and disposal ceremony on Armed Forces Day.

The ceremony begins at 1 p.m. May 21 in the west parking lot of the VFW.

A local color guard will be present and Lincoln Challenge Academy Director Peter Thomas will bring cadets to participate.

World War II Marine veteran, long-time VFW member and Richard L. Pittman Marine Corps League Chaplain Tom Henderson will lead the ceremony by disposing of the flags in a portable incinerator, according to federal protocol.

More information about flag disposal is available online.

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King students get look at new construction

Sat, 05/21/2011 - 10:00am | Jodi Heckel

URBANA — Students at King Elementary School got a look Friday at the new portion of their school building, still a work in progress.

When they return to school in the fall, they'll see the completed project — a new gym, a multipurpose room, two new classrooms, a courtyard, a fine arts suite with rooms for music, art, drama and dance, and a new entrance.

The \$7 million project — being paid for with money from the 1-cent school facilities sales tax — is adding 18,000 square feet, as well as renovating portions of the existing building, including turning the existing gym into fine arts spaces.

On Friday, Principal Jennifer Ivory-Tatum led groups of children through the new part of the building as workers were laying bricks and concrete block, and putting up the structures to hold the windows that will take up almost the entire west wall of the multi-purpose room.

"They're almost done," said kindergartener Ca'vaiss Bundridge of the multi-purpose room, even though it was filled with construction materials and equipment. "Whoa, look at that light!"

His classmate, Ari Tantular, pointed out a pile of bricks in the new courtyard: "Those are the bricks that they're going to use."

The students were most impressed with gym.

"I heard somebody say it was humongous. That's a really good word," Ivory-Tatum said.

After looking around the new gym, first-grader Khani Thomas asked: "We got two gyms. What are we going to do with the other gym?"

Ivory-Tatum explained that it would be turned into rooms for music and art.

The extent of work on the building will increase as of June 1, when the renovations begin. King school got special permission to end its school year on May 27, rather than on May 31 with the rest of the district, Ivory-Tatum said.

"There's a lot that's happening in the construction schedule for June 1," she said. "We'll all be in here Memorial Day weekend to pack up and get out. We'll all be working like crazy."

On June 1, workers are cutting power to the building and starting demolition on the current office area.



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They'll be working simultaneously this summer on finishing the addition to the school and renovating the existing building. The work is scheduled to be completed Aug. 6.

This winter's weather put the project behind schedule. The construction crew lost 22 work days between Thanksgiving and Feb. 1 due to weather, said Mark Parker, the site superintendent with Johnston Contractors of Bloomington.

They worked nine Saturdays this spring to get back on schedule.

"We're where we want to be now," Parker said.

The workers have done preliminary work in the existing building during winter and spring breaks, including putting in ductwork for air-conditioning.

In the next six weeks, they'll put in the gym floor, add basketball equipment and the stage curtain, and complete the ceilings in the new addition, along with the renovation work.

After seeing the new parts of their school, the King students signed a construction beam that will hang in the new office at the school.

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NAACP Map Approved by Champaign County Board

Story date: Friday, May 20, 2011 from Illinois Public Media News

The Champaign County board approved a 10-year district map Thursday night that was drawn by the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The map seeks to magnify the impact of minority groups during elections.

The county board added two districts, which board members say will become urban areas based on population growth. The local NAACP says those two districts have an opportunity to attract a large number of minorities who can influence elections. The group's former director, Rev. Jerome Chambers, said he hopes the redistricting plan gives more people a feeling that their votes count.

"This is perhaps maybe getting finally a piece of the pie instead of the crumbs from the master's table," Chambers said. "I think it's monumental, and I'm glad to have been a part of it."

Champaign County Farm Bureau President Jerry Watson criticized the map before the vote, saying it doesn't have enough districts that are majority rural.

"Farm Bureau wants a map that will show a fair and equal opportunity of representing all citizens," Watson said. "Without four majority rural districts, that simply is not going to be achieved."

The board was expected to talk about two others maps, which were designed by the county's regional planning commission. Republican board member Alan Nudo said he was stunned there wasn't any discussion about them before the vote.

"The board had asked for three maps to discuss," Nudo said. "They wanted three maps. We didn't discuss any of them. We didn't know the merits between A, B, and C. It could have been done better. Probably the same map would have been selected, but I have some concerns about that map."

Nudo questions who actually drew the map, and said the map does not contain a majority minority district. A majority minority district is where minorities make more than half of the voting age population.

Leading up to Thursday's vote of the NAACP map, the Champaign County Redistricting Commission studied nearly 30 different maps since January. The commission had asked a planner to tweak prospective maps designed by the county's Regional Planning Commission to emphasize items like population variance, rural districts, and the so-called 'majority minority' districts.

Democratic Champaign County Board member Michael Richards, who served on the redistricting commission, said he is confident certain areas of the county will continue to elect minority candidates even if they aren't considered a majority minority district.

"The U.S. Justice Department is not concerned about whether you must have a district that is majority African American to elect African Americans in Champaign County because we've been doing it for decades," Richards said. "It's just not possible to take a square of the community that is 20,000 people and to have it be majority African American."

Richards said the NAACP map includes many of the features that are part of the county's existing district map, including three and a half rural districts, one district designed to have an all African American representation and one minority influence district with a multi-racial representation.

The map also creates a majority campus district stretching from downtown Champaign to the Illinois Street residence halls on Lincoln Avenue in Urbana.

According to Richards, the final vote for the map was 14-13, with all Democrats voting in favor of the plan except for Brendan McGinty (D-Urbana). Every Republican voted against the measure.

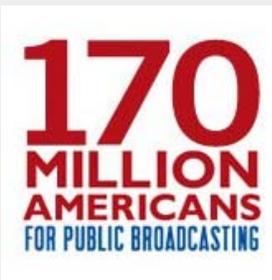
By the time the chosen map takes effect in 2012, the county board will be reduced by five



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members, and divided into 11 districts rather than nine.

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Visitors get inside look at new Washington school

Tue, 05/24/2011 - 10:00am | Jodi Heckel

CHAMPAIGN — Mary and Tony Hynes have been watching the progress on the new Washington Elementary School from the outside.

"We've been driving by, watching it go up," Mary Hynes said.

On Monday afternoon, the Hynes — parents of Alex, who is just finishing second grade — got a look at it from the inside.

"There's nothing like walking through it," Hynes said. "I love the openness of it."



Photo by: Darrell Hoemann/The News-Gazette
Visitors tour the rebuilt Booker T. Washington School in Champaign.

They were among parents, Champaign school district administrators, school board members, representatives of the teacher and staff unions, and city officials who toured the new building. Although it isn't finished — there is still work to be done on finishing the floors and ceilings, and adding cabinets in classrooms, shelves in the library and equipment elsewhere — visitors got an idea of how it will look when it's ready for students.

The school is a colorful one — turquoise and bright green are the dominant colors on walls throughout, with purple, orange, dark blue and yellow in various areas. Classrooms are grouped according to grade level, and the three classrooms for each grade level open via folding glass doors onto "piazzas," or common spaces that can be used for collaborative activities.

"Classrooms often have a sense of an enclosed space," Tony Hynes said. "Here, everything seems much more open. It flows between spaces. It has a very different feel to it."

Another parent, Melanie Paul, added: "I think the piazzas are a very ingenious use of space — to open some doors and there is a common area that three classrooms can use.

"They seem to have done a really good job of fitting creative (spaces) and green technology into a limited space, on a limited site," she continued. "That's what's most impressive to me."

When the new building opens in August, it will be a magnet school with a theme of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. The STEM theme will be evident throughout the building, said architect Stu Brodsky, of OWP/P of Chicago.

The gym floor will include images of geometric equations, in addition to lines for the basketball court. The lights in each piazza form the pattern of different constellations.

Windows in the music and art rooms on the second floor look down onto the commons area and a STEM lab space for experiments, respectively. The idea, Brodsky said, is that everything is connected to learning, and each subject is connected to the others.

The school will have a geothermal heating and cooling system. Several rooms have "solar tube"

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skylights. When enough light is coming through them, the room lights will shut off.

The school's roof will have a reflective white coating that will reduce heat absorption and make the building easier to cool.

Brodsky said the school will be 40 percent more efficient than a traditional school, due to the geothermal, energy-efficient lighting and energy-efficient windows.

The school will have an outdoor courtyard with plantings, including raised vegetable beds that tie in with the science curriculum for kindergarten students. In addition, each piazza will have a door onto a small outdoor learning area.

Several hallways on the second floor overlook areas below, including the library and STEM lab. Some visitors Monday expressed concerns about safety, but Brodsky said the railing height is code-compliant and he was comfortable with it.

Tony Hynes said he is eager to learn more about the curriculum for the school.

"The programs will make the space work," he said. "Bringing the programs into the space and integrating the curriculum and activities will be interesting to see."

His wife Mary added: "I think we're going to be very happy here."

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