

Passionate parents give preliminary update on progress of the citizen-staff Facilities Utilization Task Force



On June 28, 2005, the School Board heard a preliminary update on the progress of the 28-member citizen-staff Facilities Utilization Task Force.

The group was formed in January 2005 to visit, study, and review all district sites, prioritize the district's facilities needs, and to give a final report and recommendations to the School Board by November-December 2005.

The Task Force began its work following nearly a one-year study by architects and engineers of the district's mechanical and electrical systems; health, safety, and security; accessibility; technology needs; and academic issues related to facilities.

Three Task Force members, each a district resident and parent, provided the update to the Board. They were Dick Morin, John Stroebel, and Jodi Ruch.

Dick Morin, parent of District 16 graduates and long-time resident, spoke about Task Force tours of each facility to judge their condition and needs. "We even went into the belly of the beast," he said, "looking at 50 year-old boilers."

He said the Task Force had a nice mixture of representatives from the three cities, parents of current students, parents of graduates, community members, staff, and administrators. "Lots of perspectives."

Morin said he had also participated in a facilities study that preceded the district's 1995 bond referendum. At the time, he said, \$60 million in needs were identified, but after



Dr. Helmstetter answers a question during a discussion at the June 23 meeting of the citizen-staff Facilities Utilization Task Force.

"months and months of cutting" the proposal that went before voters had less than half of the identified needs. It passed, he reminded the audience, "but the previous needs are now ten years older, ten years more expensive, and there are now ten more years worth of needs."

"Let's fix it, let's do it right, let's do it all this time. The students and their facilities are our responsibility."

Reporting on deferred maintenance needs, Morin said "we need to address these needs as soon as possible. We have 30-50 year-old boilers, old heating and ventilation systems, and under-powered electrical systems.

"The majority of our buildings still have single-pane windows, and there are safety and security needs. And, our driveways, parking lots, and traffic flow needs a lot of attention."

"At the high school," Morin added, "our track is no longer useable for varsity athletics, our football field is literally sinking into the ground, and there are security issues with the location of the performance gym."

"The football team uses the field for games, but not for practices, and the field is also off limits to most other sports and all gym classes.

"If we were to consider a synthetic turf field, we could get more than ten times the use of this facility. "We could make it useable all day, take it away from just the use by the football team, and give it back to the entire student body."

There are, he emphasized, over \$60 million in priority maintenance projects. These are items that ought to be completed within 0-5 years to maintain the physical integrity of the buildings.

"Let's not make the same mistake that was made ten years ago," Morin concluded. "Let's fix it, let's do it right, let's do it all this time. The students and their facilities are our responsibility."

Task Force member John Stroebel, another district parent, said that after spending months studying deferred maintenance needs, he and others came to the realization that the district's maintenance staff "does an outstanding job," but that "our eyes were opened to many urgent needs."

What the Task Force is now focused on, he said, are "options and opportunities."

“One of the many things we have been exposed to,” he said, “were the Minnesota Department of Education guidelines relating to renovation versus new construction. One such guideline states that “when the estimated costs of renovating or improving a school facility approach 60 % of the cost of replacing the facility, a school district needs to replace the facility.”

State guidelines say that the likelihood that a school facility needs to be replaced increases if:

1. the school site is too small to meet current needs for parking and outdoor activities.
2. it is very difficult or impossible to solve school site issues by closing streets and/or purchasing adjacent properties.
3. major portions of a school are greater than 50 years old and/or in poor condition.
4. there are many additions to the school over the years and learning and support spaces that should be clustered together are separated.
5. mechanical, electrical, plumbing, heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems are in poor condition.
6. windows, ceilings, and walls need replacement
7. there are significant health and safety issues relating to indoor air quality, asbestos, fire safety, mold, and water penetration.
8. wiring for technology is costly because of the age or design of the school.
9. operational and maintenance costs are high.
10. the district has the bonding capacity to build a new school.
11. the school is likely to serve students for the life of the bond issue.

Stroebel then presented a chart that showed the cost of top-priority deferred maintenance projects (renovation). It also showed, for comparison purposes, what the cost would be for new construction, and the percentage that renovation would be in comparison to new construction

Other state guidelines address the size; in particular the number of acres upon which a school is located. Spring Lake Park High School, Stroebel continued, is on 40 acres, and it should be closer to 55 acres.

Greg Dehler of WOLD Architects & Engineers said the Facilities Specialist from the Department of Education has already indicated that he may not approve high school improvements with an elementary school remaining on the site.

Renovation vs. New Construction				
School	Cost of Priority Deferred Maintenance Projects (renovation)	Square Feet	Cost of New Construction (for comparison)	Renovation as a percentage of New Construction. 60% is the critical State Dept. number)
Spring Lake Park High School	\$23,636,450	300,000	\$52,5000,00	45%
Kenneth Hall Elementary	\$6,602,158	50,000	\$8,750,000	75%
Part Terrace Elementary	\$6,227,375	73,000	\$12,775,000	49%
Westwood Elementary	\$7,590,975	75,000	\$13,125,000	58%
Westwood Middle School	\$10,226,550	200,000	\$35,000,000	29%
Woodcrest Elementary	\$5,932,480	55,000	\$9,625,000	62%
District Office	\$809,975	10,000	\$1,750,000	46%
TOTAL	\$61,025,963	763,000	\$133,525,000	46%

Cost of New Construction column is estimated at \$175 per square foot

Kenneth Hall Elementary alone, he said should have about 15 acres unto itself, but instead shares the 40 acres of the “high school complex.”

Making it even tighter, the site is shared by the district offices, by 250 students attending early childhood programs, and by over 400 students who attend various Learning Alternatives programs.

The Facilities Specialist from the Department of Education has already indicated that he may not approve high school improvements with an elementary school remaining on the site.

“It is a very tight fit,” Stroebel added, “well under-state guidelines.”

The 40-acre site should be closer to 70 or 80, or some things will need to be altered or removed.

A total of over 2,500 students and staff utilize the current 40-acre site. For comparison purposes, this is more than the number of residents that live in the entire city of Osseo, Minnesota.

Although this is a preliminary update, he said, Kenneth Hall Elementary is a likely candidate to be taken down.

The Task Force also strongly agrees that a new elementary school be considered in the new high-growth area of Blaine, with sufficient, state-approved space.

According to Dr. Helmstetter, the district received a verbal commitment several weeks earlier, for the purchase of property near the northern border of the district’s boundaries.

At this point, the School Board has not made a decision regarding the construction of a new school, in fact has not even discussed it. The Task Force, which is providing research, advice, and community opinion, will

not make its final facilities recommendations until late fall at the earliest.

Dr. Helmstetter said that it makes good business sense to obtain land that is rapidly becoming unavailable because the Task Force and School Board are, at the very least, going to consider a new school. Having property, he added was far better than having the need for a school and nowhere to build one.

It allows the district to keep its options open indefinitely.

If purchased, the property would become a district asset, so if a new school in Blaine is a part of a bond referendum, and the referendum is not successful, the School Board could then sell the property.

The land would be sufficient for a possible new elementary school. It is approximately 20 acres in size and adjoins another 20 acres that will become a city park near The Lakes development in Blaine.

Stroebe said that with the message from the state to free-up additional space for the high school, including open space and athletic fields, the Task Force intends to spend time considering how or if moving the district offices, early childhood programs, or Learning Alternatives would solve problems.

He said that more discussion is also needed regarding the needs of Woodcrest, and that Westwood Elementary is in a favorable position with its physical connection to the middle school.

Park Terrace Elementary, he said, is a “difficult space” and that if everything needed to make it an ideal facility were done, it would require major changes and result in a percentage greater than 60% on the renovation-to-new construction chart.

“But,” he added, “more Task Force discussion is forthcoming on this school as well.”

Jodi Ruch, the third speaker, a parent of four and Task Force member, said when she first saw the cost figure related to deferred maintenance, she had “sticker-shock, but I came to an understanding of the needs, and I received good answers to my questions.”

“No one, including me,” she said “is excited about increasing taxes, but there are glaring deficiencies and worn out, added-onto, patched-together facilities” that must be addressed.

“We cannot,” she added, “continue to put on band-aids. Long-term, we need



Windows at Spring Lake Park High School's main entrance.

to consider what is best for taxpayers; we need to take pride in and take care of what we have.”

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Additional consensus items for Task Force members, Ruch said, included additional classrooms at the middle school—due to enrollment growth and to better accommodate teaching and learning—and that “the oldest portions of the high school should be replaced, and the rest reconfigured.”

“After seeing what I’ve seen of the district’s facilities,” Ruch concluded, “I’d be excited by the kind of plan that the Task Force is working on. I’d be proud to be a part of it.”

A Task Force handout further summarized their work-to-date as well as the directions that their study and deliberations have taken them so far. It said

1. Deferred maintenance items listed as “priority 1 or 2” should be implemented as soon as possible

and should be included as priorities in the final Facilities Utilization Plan. These items include updates to mechanical systems; electrical systems; heating, air conditioning, and ventilation systems; safety and security; air quality; roofs; windows; technology and technology infrastructure; as well as driveways, parking lots, play fields, and grounds.

2. The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) facility specialist has informed the District that the high school site is too small to effectively accommodate all of the programs that presently utilize it.

He has stated that it is not likely that he would approve a District facilities plan that retains both an elementary school and a high school on the existing forty-acre site. Additionally, recent studies of demographic data show rapid growth in the northern portion of our District in Blaine.

For these reasons and more, a new elementary school with multi-use capabilities should be built in that area.



A tennis court at Westwood Middle School.

3. The School Board must also strongly consider moving out of the Board of Education Building to provide more space for the high school, which by present MDE standards should be located on a site of about twice its present acreage.

4. It should be noted that the MDE specialist also reminded the District of this critical point: When the estimated costs of renovating or improving a school facility approach 60% of the cost of replacing the facility, a school district needs to replace the facility.

In a proposed renovation project, a school district is expected to bring the facility up to current codes and address educational deficiencies as well. Within this context, the Task Force will continue to look at positive options for our elementary schools.

5. The oldest parts of the high school complex should be replaced with a two-story section to provide greater educational effectiveness.

The high school should also be rezoned for greater security, accessibility, and educational effectiveness.

This would include additional security measures, additional parking space, and solutions to greatly increase usage by physical education classes and athletic programs in a complex with too little space.

- 6. Additional classrooms are needed at the Westwood Middle School due to enrollment growth, and these should be completed as soon as possible.
- 7. It is estimated that it could cost about \$90 million to meet all high-priority deferred maintenance and new construction needs. However, although the present needs are great, the District should make every effort to plan for and seek funding for the completion of all priority items.

The Task Force believes that a future proposed bond referendum should fund all priority items while limiting the cost to the average homeowner to about \$15-20 per month.

Greg Dehler from WOLD Architects & Engineers talked about one from among a number of scenarios that Task Force members have spent some time reviewing.

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community will need.”***

This scenario would address a number of the state department guidelines, freeing up space by removing Kenneth Hall Elementary, the district offices, and the early childhood and Learning Alternatives wings of the high school complex and by removing parts or all of Kenneth Hall Elementary.

The high school would then gain a second story over a substantial portion of the school and be modernized, reorganized, and “rezoned.”

Academic disciplines would be grouped together in a more logical manner and, as an example of rezoning, one section of the building would house the fine arts center, music, athletics, the pool, and gyms, and would be closed off from the remainder of the school, particularly during evenings and weekends for safety and security reasons.



An elementary school’s parking lot.

Dr. Helmstetter noted that since February 1, the group had had 11 long meetings, and that their work is not yet over.

In concluding statements, Board Chair Jim Amundson and Dr. Helmstetter thanked the three Task Force presenters and expressed appreciation for the work of the Task Force to date.

Amundson asked about the anticipated next steps for the Task Force. Helmstetter said that there are more meetings to be scheduled, and a lot more discussion that needs to take place about some major challenges. This, he said, would be taking place this summer and in early fall.

Public meetings and listening sessions would follow and the Task Force plans would begin to become more refined. Final Task Force recommendations to the School Board are anticipated by late fall.

The Board would then make a decision on the recommendations and on a probable bond referendum election in late fall or by December at the latest.

Dick Morin, concluding on behalf of the Task Force presenters, said: “We’re taxpayers. We’re not going to be proposing things we don’t think that the community will need.”

“It’s a great time for funding much-needed projects, he said, adding that “interest rates are favorable and we’ll be able to get 3-4 times more done than ten years ago. Let’s do it right.”