



Charles County Public Schools

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For Immediate Release
October 15, 2009

Board votes to move forward with new high school

The Board of Education voted Tuesday to move ahead with a request to the state to build a new high school despite reservations about future operating costs.

Voting 5 to 2, Board members accepted the recommendation of Superintendent James E. Richmond to ask the state for approval for the Waldorf-area high school that will relieve overcrowding and add another high-tech facility for student and community use. Richmond acknowledged Board members' concerns about a lack of a long-term funding commitment; however, he said the school system needs to work with the county and take advantage of a positive building climate to get the best construction costs.

"After looking at the situation and the number of students at each high school and in portables, I think we need to go ahead with the high school and request planning approval. The opening is three to four years down the road and we need to work with the county for operating costs sufficient enough to open the school without compromising programs or staffing at other schools," Richmond said.

Vice chairman Roberta Wise said the school board has already compromised with the county on the building design, but she believes the window of opportunity for low construction costs narrows each day the Board delays. "We have discussed class size and we keep adding educational cottages. Everything I read and hear indicates the economy is moving in a positive direction. I do not take risks with money, but I think we should move forward with this for our children," she added.

Maura Cook, board member, expressed reservation about the lack of commitment from the county about operating costs. "I still have deep concerns about the recurring costs," she said. However, she added she would continue to push the commissioners for funding and what is needed for children.

If approved by the state, the new four-story high school would be located on Piney Church Road and contain a science center with a digital classroom and Science on a Sphere, a courtyard with an outdoor classroom, a 400-seat natatorium, 650-seat

auditorium and a 2,000-seat gymnasium. It will also include green features such as geothermal energy, solar hot water, day lighting and rainwater harvesting.

Pam Pedersen said, “My responsibility as a board member is to do what is right for education and I must push, scream and yell for funding and what is best for our students, teachers and community.” She added that she would also continue to push for funding to open the school right and not on the backs of students and teachers.

Wise made the motion, seconded by Charles Carrington, to accept the new high school and ask for planning approval. Chairman Donald Wade, Wise, Carrington, Cook and Pedersen voted in favor of the motion. Board members Jennifer Abell and Collins Bailey voted against.

Abell said she wanted to be clear that her negative vote does not mean she is against the high school. “We need the high school. We are already overcrowded and the original design has been completely changed due to the value engineering imposed by the county commissioners.” She added that the commissioners in the last meeting with the board of education on Sept. 28 would not commit to finding the \$18 million needed to open and operate the high school the first year and \$14 million needed each subsequent year to run it. “I cannot in good conscious vote for it,” she concluded.

Bailey attempted to amend the motion to include a requirement that the commissioners provide a written, binding agreement to fund the operating costs of the school that also included the percentage of the county’s budget that they would commit to education. The motion, seconded by Abell, did not pass.

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