

FAMILY



School Growth Taskforce learns from Loudoun Co.

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STAFF WRITER

Though both the Chesterfield and Loudoun county school systems have about 58,000 students, Loudoun spends \$13,000 annually to educate each child compared to only \$9,903 in Chesterfield. About 70 percent of Loudoun's total budget goes to the school system compared to 51 percent in Chesterfield. Loudoun's total budget for schools and county government is \$1.6 billion for 282,000 residents while Chesterfield's is \$1.3 billion for 311,000.

One year, largely to pay for the school's operating budget, the Loudoun Board of Supervisors raised the property tax rate from 96 cents per \$100 of assessed value to \$1.14. The typical school in Loudoun has less than one trailer functioning as a classroom while Chesterfield averages about five trailers.

Building new schools fast enough to keep up with the high growth rate "has been expensive," according to Ben Mays, Loudoun's deputy chief financial officer.

He briefed the School Growth Taskforce late last month. Late this year, the taskforce will offer recommendations to the school board on how to deal with the county's overcrowded schools.

Mays acknowledged that his northern Virginia county is appealing to families of school-age children with more than half

the households having children in Loudoun schools. Just 42 percent of Chesterfield households have kids in public schools.

"Only 3-4 percent of the lifecycle cost of a school is the initial construction," said Mays.

To keep the cost of the land purchases down for school sites, Loudoun "has used the threat of eminent domain."

Building costs

While some parents have accused Chesterfield County Public Schools of building "palaces," Kathy Kitchen, assistant superintendent for business and finance, showed the taskforce data that has the new Cosby High School as being slightly smaller than the state average for square feet per pupil. The cost per square foot is \$208 for the replacement for Clover Hill High School (CHHS), \$2 more than the state average for high schools.

Back in 2002, Matoaca High School was built for \$45.5 million. In 2010 when the new CHHS opens, that school will cost \$76.2 million.

"The price increase has driven us to evaluate what we do," Kitchen told the taskforce. Those considerations include a smaller auditorium and gym, possibly no stadium for a high school, and more narrow hallways.

The forum, where the taskforce met at Cosby, has a capacity for 365 persons with a ceiling about 25 feet high. It is used for meetings.