

New task force to tackle school overcrowding issue

By Victoria Bragunier

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

An 18-member task force met for the first time last week to begin finding solutions for how to alleviate overcrowding at the county's schools.

At the helm of the task force are co-chairs, David Wyman, Dale District school board member, and Dr. JoLynne DeMary, former state superintendent of public instruction. The panel comprises a cross-section of business leaders, educators, county personnel and others.

Chesterfield Superintendent Marcus Newsome addressed the task force offering encouragement to its members.

"The looming challenge for Chesterfield County is to accommodate growth," said Newsome. "There is exciting work ahead of us with a lot of challenges. I am confident that this group will provide the leadership to address this matter."

On average, Chesterfield County Public Schools (CCPS) adds 800-1,000 students each year, causing overcrowding at many schools and forcing some students to attend classes in trailers. The school system opened two new elementary schools this school year, and two new middle schools will open in the fall. A new high school will open on Genito Road in 2010. Fourteen schools have or will receive additions.

Still, the buildup has only helped CCPS tread water when it comes to alleviating crowded classrooms. According to enrollment projections, the school system will need another six new schools by 2014, but there's only funding available to build one and a portion of another one.

"We are anticipating 1,000 new students being added each year for the next 10 years," Wyman told his fellow task force members. "We are looking to add about 13 new schools over the next 10 to 15 years at a cost of \$500-\$600 million."

The task force has been charged with finding ways to address rising student enrollments. Their duties will include reviewing the functional capacities of current schools and determining if they're being used efficiently. They will also study student enrollment trends, county demographics and best practices for school construction, design, maintenance and financing.

"Chesterfield is one of the 100 largest school districts in the United States," said Cynthia Richardson, CCPS director of planning, during her briefing.

Richardson presented an overview of existing school facilities and current student capacities. There are 38 elementary, 13 middle and 11 high schools in the county, along with a technical center. As of the 2007-08 school year, these structures housed 58,062 students, with an additional 352 students attending the Maggie L. Walker and Appomattox governor's schools.

Richardson outlined current enrollment numbers and then gave future projections. Elementary enrollments are expected to grow from 25,953 students to 28,972 by 2013. At the middle school level, enrollments are anticipated to reach 15,787 from 13,656, while the high school level is projected to rise to 18,938 from 18,453.

"Our largest growth is located in the western and southern regions of the county," said Richardson.

Bill Handley, the county's demographer, spoke to the group regarding demographics and residential growth - but added a small conciliation.

"Are we the fastest growing county in the country? Not true, not even close," said Handley. "We are the 313th fastest growing county in the country and 25th fastest in Virginia."

The housing crunch has slowed building in the county, and fewer than 300 houses have been built so far this year.

Reviewing population demographics, Handley stated the estimated population of the county as of January was 311,000. Those ages 40-49 make up the largest age group in the county. Moreover, female-headed households have increased.

Glenn Larson, the county's assistant director of planning, discussed the importance of updating the county's comprehensive plan.

"We are starting a new initiative to step back and look at our comprehensive plan, and really look at it from a total countywide perspective," said Larson. "We want to establish a blueprint that will guide land use in Chesterfield County. It is important that school recommendations be incorporated in the plan."

Two other areas of concern, short- and long-term maintenance needs and school security, were also addressed.

Prior to the conclusion of the meeting, Wyman and DeMary asked task force members to submit ideas on what issues should be addressed at the next meeting. With the exception of July, the group will meet monthly through October and make final recommendations to the school board in November.

Who's on the task force?

Co-chair: David Wyman, Dale District school board member
Co-chair: Dr. JoLynne DeMary, former state superintendent of public instruction

Matt Alexander, Chesterfield Business Council

Cliff Bickford, member of the county's Sustain Our Communities Committee

Victor Branch, Bank of America and Chesterfield Public Education president

Tim Bullis, school system
Alan Carmody, county budget department

Fred Carreras, Chesterfield Chamber of Commerce

Stella Edwards, Chesterfield Council of PTAs

Dr. Lyle Evans, school system
Otis Jones, IBM and Chesterfield Public Education Foundation

Glenn Larson, county planning department
Joe Lenzi, county energy manager

Dr. Edward Pruden, school system
David Saunders, Madison & Main Advertising

Danny Smith, Communities in Schools
Lois Stanton, Chesterfield Education Association

Dr. Sharon Thomas, school system