A growing problem: With enrollment on the rise, QSD calls on community for answers  

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When the Quincy School District's newly formed facilities committee meets for the first time this week, a group of two dozen citizens and school employees will begin the process of deciding what the school district should look like in the very near future.

Among the committee's jobs will be to determine what future buildings are needed to accommodate a growing student enrollment — and how much the community is willing to pay for those additions.

"This is a starting point for us to piece together the needs of the kids with something the community can support and wants," said John Boyd, district superintendent.

The committee, which meets Thursday, will be tasked with first becoming familiar with a facilities study and survey the school district recently completed with the help of a consultant.

Every six years, school districts are eligible to apply to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction for a grant to hire an architect to complete such a survey, said Tom Harris, QSD maintenance supervisor. The school district completed a similar survey in 2008.

The new survey was paid for with an $11,300 grant from the state, Harris added.

The survey is more than 100 pages; a 15-page summary of key findings was given to the school board last week. It analyzes the growth of the school district and identifies enrollment trends. It also surveys the condition of the district's schools.

The survey reports that the school district in 2007 had 2,392 students. Today, enrollment is at 2,851 students, for an average growth of 65 students a year.

The survey shows that because of declining kindergarten numbers in 2007, the state projected a net decline in enrollment — forecasting 2,327 students by the year 2013. However, QSD reported it had 2,746 students in 2013.

"Growth pressures in QSD will become acute over the next five years, with a projected increase of 372 students by the year 2019," the survey states. "This is a 13 percent increase overall."

Boyd, who took over the school district's helm last summer, is now preparing for a projected 3,223 students in 2019.

"We're in a situation where we have to take some action to build some new facilities," he said.
A growing problem: With enrollment on the rise, QSD calls on community for answers...

The George gym doubles as a cafeteria and programming space. About 40 percent of classroom space at the school is in portables.

Most of the growth pressures are forecast at the kindergarten through eighth-grade span. In fact, because of low class enrollments in the grade levels feeding into the high school, high school numbers are expected to see a modest decline up until 2020, when high school enrollment then will rebound, the survey states.

The survey points out that the school district has dealt with its growth in most recent years by adding portables to schools. The school district now has 32 portable classrooms with another four to be added this summer, split between George and Monument.

With 26 portables serving K-8 students, almost 1 of every 4 students in the K-8 grades attends school in a portable, according to the survey.

The schools most impacted by the portables are George, Monument and Mountain View schools. At George alone, which has only six general classrooms, portables now account for 40 percent of the classroom space, Boyd said.

The problem with portables is that while they provide the classroom space needed, they don't provide the accommodations — bathrooms, storage and gym, library and cafeteria space — that also needs to be expanded to accommodate the growing student population, Boyd explained.

They also tend to be outside of the main building, creating safety and security issues, he said.

Harris added that the average grade school has 20 classrooms. With the addition of 32 portables since 2007, those portables are the equivalent of a grade school and a half, he said.

"And without the infrastructure," Harris said.

The survey concludes that the district is near its limit on portables and adding onto existing schools is not a solution because most of the existing K-8 have core spaces that will strain to accommodate additions.

The survey offers 16 options that could accommodate the growth in the school district. Of those 16 options, only half are identified as "probable options."

Options vary from building a new elementary school to building a new high school and moving junior high students into the high school. The school district owns 58 acres on the north side of town as well as 150 acres on Road 9 that may be the future sites of schools. Other options call for expansions at several of the schools.

Because the school district is eligible for only a potential $12.8 million in state assistance, any project would be paid for primarily through local funds. The school district's bond capacity is at $113.1 million, according to the survey.

Ultimately it will be the community that will have to decide what it wants the district facilities to look like now and in the future, Harris said.

"We feel strongly there needs to be some input from the community — to understand what the community wants," Boyd said.

After the committee goes over the survey, it will meet in April and May to narrow down that list of potential future construction projects to two or three scenerios as well as...
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pick a date for a public forum to gather input from the community. That public forum may come as early as mid-May.

Then, in September, the committee will present its recommendations to the school board on both future construction projects and a bond timeline for consideration.

The process means that if a bond levy is put before voters a year from now, for example, it would still take four years before the project would come to fruition.

"The longer we wait, the more portables we're going to have to stack up," Boyd said.

It's a big undertaking for a community when confronted with topics such as construction, bonds and facility planning, Boyd said. But it's also exciting to think that the community has an opportunity to do some planning for the future, he said.

"It's the opportunity that comes with growth and the challenge that comes with growth," Boyd said.

- By Jill FitzSimmons, editor@qvpr.com

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