

Citizens weigh in on need for new schools

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In a special meeting of the Mercer Island School District Board of Directors on Thursday evening, citizens voiced their opinions about the 21st Century Facilities Committee's recommendations to the district.

It is a fact that all three elementary schools are bursting at the seams, with West Mercer and Island Park's portables even at maximum capacity. Only Lakeridge Elementary could accommodate another portable — a double, which is two classrooms.

District CFO Dean Mack reiterated the fact that 650 kids are in portables now, district wide. There is also room for one more portable at Islander Middle School.

Liz Leroy, a consultant for the district, who manages the district's construction projects, showed the board and audience data on several recently built schools, with price per square foot all over the map — ranging from \$192 per square foot to \$313. She said there are many variables, but right now is a good bidding and bonding climate, given the weak economy. Mack said he has estimated \$298 per square foot for new schools on the Island, taking into account the possibility of new traffic lights and the emergency shelter element desired for each new school.

Mack advised the board against cutting corners, because in the long-term it will cost less to build current, solid buildings. The facilities committee visited several new schools in the Puget Sound area, and Leroy recommended the board do the same.

Demographics cause even more concern, as younger families with children seem to be occupying many of the homes that turned over in the past year, and apartment dwellers, normally more transitory, are staying put with .25 students per home.

Aleta Finnilla, a former school board candidate, voiced concern over the sizes of the three new elementary schools being proposed. These schools are not in addition to the existing three, but are re-builds on the same campuses.

"The crowding at West Mercer is horrible," she said.

She said West Mercer is one of the largest elementary schools in the state, with approximately 680 kids. She prefers the idea of building a fourth elementary school on the North end to keep school sizes smaller. Her ideal is 350 kids, but realistically 550 at the most.

"If you think about the overcrowding crisis in the elementaries, we have 650 kids right now that one new school could take care of a big chunk of them immediately," Finnilla said. "Education is being compromised by the crowding."

The 21st Century Facilities Committee is more in favor of rebuilding the three existing elementary schools on the existing sites. Finnilla would like to see a bond for a new elementary first, then rebuild the aging and ailing Islander Middle School.

Longtime Mercer Island resident Myra Lupton disagrees. She wants to see the district rebuild the three elementary schools on the existing sites.

"I'm so concerned for them," she said. "They are trying to survive and thrive with all these state cuts."

Lupton said the contribution made by the 21st Century Facilities Committee could not be discounted. Had the district paid for the expertise represented on the committee, it would have cost a small fortune in consultants.

The board of directors is planning to tour newer schools soon, to see what 21st century facilities are looking like.