

“you can’t build schools fast enough to keep up with that kind of growth. It’s impossible.”

As a result, school board members have begun informal, one-on-one discussions among themselves to discuss some creative solutions to the growth problem, according to Dale District School Board representative David Wyman. Board members anticipate the proposals will be formally discussed in public at board meetings this spring.

Some of the solutions proposed include Wyman’s suggestion of staggered start times, creating different class “shifts” of students at the same schools. Other suggestions include offering more Internet courses so that some

students, such as seniors who only need a few courses to graduate, could complete their work at home.

Schroeder has brought forth the notion of scaled-down schools, without all the normal amenities, such as sporting fields, for students who aren’t interested in participating in sports. “One size does not need to fit everybody, and I think we need to start looking at the concept that we don’t believe every area needs a \$90 million high school. We may be able to educate and meet the needs of a portion of the population with a different model. We need to be examining the options,” says Schroeder.

The school system already conducts quarterly assessments of enrollment growth and has contingency plans in place based on over-

enrollment at schools, such as adding trailer classrooms.

But a series of conditions may be coming together to create a “perfect storm” of growth that may overwhelm any traditional means of dealing with overcrowded schools. The county already has more than 290,000 residents and some 58,000 students, making it one of the nation’s 100 largest school districts, but new communities such as Magnolia Green will stretch resources further than ever. A proposed residential community with 4,886 lots in the county’s far western end, north of Hull Street Road and west of Otterdale Road, Magnolia Green will probably bring in about 2,800 or more new students to county schools, says Kathryn Kitchen, the county’s assistant super-

intendent for business and finance. However, build-out could take 20 years.

A major expansion at Fort Lee in Prince George County is estimated to bring another 4,200 school children to the area over the next five years. Many of their parents may choose to settle in Chesterfield because of its award-winning schools, Schroeder says.

Kitchen adds that the system has been growing by about 1,100 students a year since 2001: “That’s more than an elementary school’s worth each year,” says Kitchen.

The county’s current capital construction plan for schools includes Elizabeth N. Scott Elementary School and Elizabeth B. Davis Middle School in the Bermuda District; Winterpock Elementary in the Matoaca District near the Harper’s Mill subdivision; and Tomahawk Creek Middle School, also in the Matoaca District on Centerpointe Parkway.

The county is limited in how much debt it can take on for new school construction and still maintain its valuable Triple-A bond rating, though the county may be able to look at taking additional debt service for schools through the Virginia Public School Authority, a bond-issuing division of the state Department of the Treasury.

Finding the money to pay for the ever-growing system’s needs remains a challenge.

The board of supervisors is looking to reduce property tax rates this year, but “that takes away from our operating budget, which is where we get the money to pay for buildings,” Schroeder says. “A one-penny reduction [in the property tax rate] is equivalent to about \$1.5 million in our [annual] budget.”

Additionally, proffers – the \$15,000-plus per-lot fees charged to developers to offset county services and infrastructure – aren’t bringing in enough dollars to help the school system cope with the growth the new developments bring in, says School Board Chairman Thomas Doland, who represents the Matoaca District. Some communities being developed now received residential zoning approval prior to proffers and therefore may be exempt from paying the per-lot fees.

Rising construction costs are yet another challenge facing board members. When first devised in 2004, the replacement for Clover Hill was estimated to cost \$55 million. Now due to rising construction costs in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and other factors, the cost has been revised to between \$82-\$92 million, Wyman says. The extra money for that project hasn’t been designated yet, but could come from a variety of sources, he says, such as issuing new Virginia Public School Authority bonds and adding in any money left over from the school system’s yearly budgets.

The county’s school system continues to operate at the lowest per-pupil rate in metro Richmond, Schroeder says, while still yielding high academic results. The schools are a draw to new residents and new businesses, yet not everyone in the county appreciates that, he says: “Chesterfield public education is the strongest economic engine we have for this area, yet we continue to look on it as a liability.”



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Chesterfield CASA will hold a spring training class from Apr. 17 through May 22.

For more information, please contact the CASA office at 276-7660.