

Scaling back?

New committee may look at ways to cut school construction costs

By Greg Pearson
STAFF WRITER

With the rising cost of the replacement for Clover Hill High School on everyone's mind, the county school board met last week in a work session to discuss design standards for a new high school in eastern Chesterfield that's expected to be built around 2012.

School board members are considering forming a committee comprised of school staff, an outside consultant and possibly a county supervisor to review design standards for new schools, which largely determine general construction costs. The process could take a year.

The school system has been criticized because the Clover Hill replacement, which goes out for bid this June, could cost \$92 million. A referendum in November 2004 projected a cost of \$55 million. Last month, county supervisors' Chairman Kelly Miller and County Administrator Lane Ramsey asked Superintendent Marcus Newsome to consider scaling back the replacement school on Genito Road to control costs.

During the work session last week, Kathy Kitchen, assistant superintendent for business and finance, projected an additional \$18 million is needed to build and renovate the schools approved by the voters in the 2004 referendum. The school system will most likely borrow the money from the Virginia School Public Authority at favorable rates because of the county's high bond rating.

Many citizens are questioning school construction costs – particularly for high schools. Not including the cost of land, Kitchen estimated the current costs of building a high school at \$58-\$65 million, \$28 million for a middle school and \$15 million for an elementary school.

The typical high school has 75-100 acres, 50-60 acres for a middle school and 20-30 acres for an elementary school. The Clover Hill replacement high school site is 81 acres. The largest high school site – 146 acres



Page Dowdy/Chesterfield Observer

The school system is currently building an elementary and a middle school in the Bermuda District (above) along with two more new schools in the Matoaca District.

at Matoaca High School – includes acreage for a wastewater treatment plant that needed to be built.

"We're fairly constrained by the state on our building process," said Marshall Trammell Jr., school board representative for the Bermuda District. The state sets specifications on classrooms, cafeterias, auditoriums, gymnasiums and locker rooms.

Chesterfield could use cheaper building materials like sheetrock for classroom walls, but "then our schools wouldn't last 50 years," argued Midlothian School Board member Jim Schroeder.

"Schools are much different today," Schroeder continued. They cost more because schools have to educate children for the jobs of tomorrow, and those differences – like technology – cost more, he said.

Earlier, school board members also acknowledged that parents expect more of public education, driving up school costs. Parents of children who attend older schools

want those schools to be upgraded so they are competitive with newer schools.

With Chesterfield schools adding more than 1,000 students each fall, there are limited options to deal with crowded classrooms. They include moving special schools – like gifted and English as a Second Language programming – to less crowded schools. But usually the choice is to add classroom trailers. School officials insist there is no difference in the quality of education in a portable classroom versus a permanent building, but some parents believe otherwise.

Where's my snow day?

My apologies to moms who would rather not have their kids at home and retailers who would like us all to be at the mall, but I need a snow day. I prefer a day when I have outside appointments so when they're cancelled I don't have to feel guilty. And, I'd like enough notice so I can rent a sappy movie and check out a good mystery from the library.



Loose Ends
Susan Nienow

First, I would feed the birds on the deck because they need help when it snows. I know all the seeds that fall below sprout in the spring and have to be pulled but that never seems like a big deal in the winter. Remind me of the starving birds in June when I am crouched under the deck picking seedlings out of the stones, bumping my head on the joists and making my knees very angry.

Last year, I took a snow day when I got tired of waiting for a real one. Actually it worked out better. I had my choice of movies to rent and didn't have to spread birdseed over the snow on the deck railings. I had to stick to the rules though. No lying on the couch eating a box of chocolates. No staying in bed. I have to

get up and actually enjoy my day off.

Also, no working. No cleaning the bathroom or doing a load of wash. I don't even water the plants. And absolutely no getting down on the floor with my glasses on. Just a glimpse of my dust bunny collection or the spots on the floor would ruin the "no guilt" part of my day.

I know. I mentioned cleaning out my closet. I haven't done that yet this year. That isn't work for me. I get to make a list of clothes I need to go with things I already have. That means shopping. So really, cleaning out my closet is nothing more than making a shopping list.

I can catch up on my magazines. We must get hundreds. Ok, maybe only 20. Some come every other month, and a few are weekly. They add up. I can't believe I ordered all of them. Well, there were those frequent flyer miles that I would lose if I didn't order magazines.

So while I flip through magazines I can watch craft TV or maybe homeowners' TV. Yesterday I learned how to turn a fruit crate into a TV stand and how to make a kaleidoscope out of a piece of copper pipe. Today there is a special on how to make bugs out of coat hangers and paper cups. Do people buy those? What would I do with them?

What I need is a lesson on speed painting. Paint an entire room in four hours including set up and clean up. Instead, I watch someone turn a cigar box into a container for a flower arrangement. That should come in handy.

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