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District Grapples with Old Schools, More Kids

By Cathy Tyson

The initial meeting to assess the facilities of the Lafayette School District kicked off, appropriately, at Lafayette Elementary School, which first opened its doors to students in 1943.

The District faces a two-fold problem: schools are old and in need of significant repair, and the student population is gradually increasing. Architectural firm HKIT spent the summer analyzing exiting conditions and needs at Burton Valley, Happy Valley, Lafayette, and Springhill elementary schools, as well as at Stanley Middle School, the Lafayette School District offices and the White Pony School. HKIT staff also talked to principals and teachers to get a handle on exactly what was needed to modernize the facilities.

On average, four of the five schools that make up the district are 62 years old and are suffering from some of the maladies of old age. Springhill Elementary School was upgraded in 1999.

Architect and consultant with HKIT, Dara Youngdale, explained at the Oct. 15 meeting the firm's analysis of the physical conditions of the district's buildings, overall infrastructure needs, parking, fields and play areas, current capacity and growth potential.

"This is a place where time has stood still," said Youngdale. "There has been a culture of accommodating deficiencies." She outlined examples at Lafayette Elementary School: site drainage and flooding, big problems with drop-off and parking, old energy-inefficient single-pane windows, and a need for classroom upgrades.

Parents and community members were happy to share concerns during the information-gathering component of the meeting and reported, table by table, their top priorities for the Lafayette Elementary School campus.

Keeping students safe, dry and warm was an overarching need that the consultant HKIT suggested. Building on that, almost every table of attendees commented that parking and drop off is, as one mom put it, "a nightmare."

School board member David Gerson reported that the top priority for his table, after addressing years of deferred maintenance, is the learning environment, where kids spend most of their day. Accommodating a growing number of future students is another important issue to consider when taking a comprehensive view of district facilities. There are currently 2,351 students enrolled at the four elementary schools, but estimates project an additional 100 students expected by the 2019-20 school year.

The trend is similar at Stanley Middle School, which has a current enrollment of 1,181 students and is anticipating an increase of 155 students in the next five years.

"Facilities haven't kept up with cutting-edge curriculum," Superintendent Rachel Zinn said, "and we are looking at incremental growth over the next five years of 100 students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

"What we're learning is every school has a great deal of need," adding that when it comes to financing and improvements, "we are on our own," since there is no matching money available from the state. Zinn said no decision has been made and the district is committed to keeping the assessment process open and transparent, which is the point of the Community Engagement Meetings.

As the Oct. 15 meeting wrapped up, Gerson gave a summary of the current budget situation, noting that starting in 2008 there were significant cutbacks that affected the district, with basic maintenance of the buildings the only option. One example of the current state of aging infrastructure he cited was a gas line that was installed in 1954 at Burton Valley Elementary School, and a leak in the line that left students without heat for a week in early March of this year.

Each school in the district is planning a meeting to promote dialogue with parents and the community about specific school needs. That information will be presented to the school board, along with poll results that will be completed in November. It will be up to the board to make a decision to see if they would like to pursue a general obligation bond to address a school facilities

overhaul.

The old library directly adjacent to Lafayette Elementary School is another consideration in the overall facilities picture. The LSD negotiated a lease with the city of Lafayette on the property in late September 2015, with an option to buy the parcel that expires on April 1, 2017. With its \$32 million annual budget, the district is in the black, but in no way could pay for an extensive remodel of campuses or purchase and renovate the library structure.

The public is welcome to attend the next three community engagement meetings, which will be held at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 22 at the Stanley Middle School multi-use room, at 5:30 p.m. Monday, Oct. 26 at the Springhill Elementary MUR, and at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 27 at the Happy Valley Elementary MUR.

To see the complete HKIT analysis of existing campus buildings and school needs, go to the LSD website, www.lafsd.k12.ca.us, then click on the Facilities Master Planning resource page, then the HKIT Architects presentation.

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