

Rockville City Council looks to join parents in advocating for school construction

Montgomery school officials acknowledge elementary schools are over capacity, but say it takes six years to build new school

by Sean Patrick Norris | Staff Writer

Although relief for overcrowding in the four elementary schools that feed Richard Montgomery High School is years away, one Rockville city councilman is asking residents to help lobby school officials for new, permanent classrooms.

Following a tour of overcrowded schools last week with school board members and Montgomery County school system construction officials, City Councilman John Britton said Monday that the city needs a coordinated, full-throttle campaign to lobby the county school board and the County Council with one goal in mind: getting more permanent classrooms for Rockville's students.

But, Britton said, the city needs residents' help.

"We need ingenuity, creativity and action," he said. "I urge you all to stay in this campaign now because it's not going to work unless we work together, loudly and credibly."

The school board is holding budget hearings on its capital improvement projects next week and the City Council hopes to apply pressure by partnering with District 17's state delegation and parents at some of the city's most overcrowded elementary schools: Beall, College Gardens and Ritchie Park, which are at 136, 118 and 133 percent above capacity, respectively.

"We need to get the word out. Every single PTA head and cluster coordinator should testify," Britton said.

The desire for a coordinated campaign comes in part from last week's tour of Richard Montgomery's feeder schools.

During the tour, the council received two messages: schools take a long time to build and portable classrooms are a major part of the school system's overcrowding solution.

"It takes six years to plan a new school," Bruce Crispell, Montgomery County Public Schools' director of long-range planning, told the council during the tour. "By the time the six-year period is over you'll see more students than there is capacity for moving on to the middle-school level."

A new elementary school would cost between \$20 million and \$25 million.

A recommendation to build the new school could be before the County Council by next fall. Ultimately, said schools spokesman Dana Tofig, it will be up to the County Council to decide whether to build the school.

"That gives us a hook to get in there and push for the quick and immediate follow-up," Britton said. "We want to make sure that nothing falls out of the pipeline."

Councilman Piotr Gajewski said he had an epiphany while on the tour.

"Portables are not a temporary solution, portables are a permanent solution for [MCPS]," Gajewski said. "For some reason, that never really struck me before."

Councilman Mark Pierzchala, Councilwoman Bridget Newton and Mayor Phyllis Marcuccio agreed the city should coordinate a campaign to lobby for permanent classrooms.

Parent Teacher Association representatives from every elementary school in the feeder system attended Monday night's City Council meeting to thank the council for touring the schools.

Rebecca Parlakian, PTA president at Beall Elementary school, was not at the meeting but said she is glad the council wants to join the PTA in its efforts.

"I think that it's very encouraging that they want to provide support for Rockville families," Parlakian said. "This is something that affects Rockville's families and their quality of life."

As Rockville prepares to lobby the school system, a study on building a new elementary school on the former site of Hungerford Elementary School on West Edmonston Drive is in the works.

Such studies generally cost between 30,000 and 50,000 dollars and take about a year.

If approved, the school would alleviate overcrowding at Beall, Twinbrook and Ritchie Park.

College Gardens is not eligible for additions because of its size. Its 670-student capacity is the limit for how large the county is willing to build an elementary school. Relief for that school will only come from moving the Chinese Immersion Program from College Gardens to the new school.

Crispell said the amount of overcrowding at Beall, Ritchie Park and Twinbrook "totally requires a new school and it's not even a question," Crispell said. "We just have to bite the bullet and get the capacity in there."

Britton said he sees the campaign as a long-term project.

"All [of county schools' plans] sound vague and ambiguous," he said. "There are other people that are going to try to bump us down the queue. We need to be there in full force throughout the process."