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Rumors Spur Drama at Burton Valley Elementary

By Cathy Tyson

Responding to a flurry of passionate social media posts about a rumored superschool at Burton Valley Elementary, Lafayette School District Superintendent Rachel Zinn calmly outlined the projected growth in district enrollment expected over the next five years, and the very preliminary early planning about how to accommodate those new students to a standing-room-only crowd of concerned parents at a recent meeting at Burton Valley Elementary School.

"There's never been an intent to have Burton Valley become a superschool," she said right off the bat to clear the air. "Our desire is to keep kids in their home schools," said Zinn.

Calling the Facilities Master Plan "truly preliminary," Zinn explained the district wanted to look at demographic data in order to be proactive and strategic to address the aging schools in the district, and assess capacity needs, in light of increasing student numbers. She also pointed out that there have been no decisions made at this point, and the district will be looking at all school sites to accommodate anticipated increasing enrollment.

At issue is a projected 109 additional students over five years spread from the kindergarten through the fifth-grade level, and a projected 155 students in five years who will attend Stanley Middle School. Those numbers translate to approximately five additional classrooms at the elementary level, and six more classrooms at Stanley.

Zinn made it clear she has an open door policy and invited those with concerns to direct their queries to her, rather than on social media, for more accurate, up-to-date information. She stayed late into the evening to answer parents' ardent concerns and threats at the meeting.

"Many parents think it's a done deal," commented Denali Allen about making Burton Valley a superschool. She's hoping to raise awareness of the situation, and is concerned about the lack of representation and parents to advocate for Burton Valley, along with increased traffic and sidewalk safety.

District administrators are seeking advice from a team of experts to consider all the options, and interviewing architects that specifically design schools to consider the cost of expansion and infrastructure repair at each of the campuses, including the Meher School's White Pony preschool on Leland Drive. The campus is owned by the Lafayette School District but has been leased for over 20 years. According to Zinn, the facility has not been upgraded in decades and would be very expensive to retrofit. However she concedes that looking far into the future - with land in Lafayette so very expensive - the district is reluctant to sell the parcel and spend the money if the site is needed down the road.

Also to be weighed is purchasing the old library property, which is directly adjacent to Lafayette Elementary School. The district has been in serious discussions with the current owner, the city of Lafayette. It could be used for classrooms and perhaps to relocate district offices from the Stanley property.

Consultants from Total School Solutions who put together the Facilities Master Plan visited all the school sites and developed a list of needs for all major building systems including mechanical, electrical and lighting for the next 10 years, even exterior elements like parking, play area, apparatus and fields. The assessment shows the construction cost coupled with soft costs, contingency and interim housing for bringing all of these old campuses into the 21st century, coming in at over \$22 million.

For example, Burton Valley Elementary was first occupied in 1957 and is still heated in some areas with boiler equipment. The estimated cost to install energy efficient HVAC to classrooms, offices, and other spaces site-wide is estimated to cost \$765,000. Happy Valley Elementary was also brand new in 1957 and has a vintage roof, gutters and downspouts that need to be updated at an estimated cost of \$297,000.

In order to pay for this modernization, the district is looking at potential revenue sources, and is considering, if the governing board agrees, to place a bond measure on the ballot in June or

November of 2016. More study sessions and community engagement will likely be slated for the fall of 2015 to discuss the issue.

Check out the whole Capacity and Utilization Study and Facilities Needs Assessment Study, to get more detail on all of the demographics and estimated update costs at the district website (www.lafsd.k12.ca.us), then click on district, then business services, then finally facilities.

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