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## Affordable housing impacts on Lafayette student enrollment

By Sharon K. Sobotta

If David Curtin still lived in Lafayette, he'd likely be a frequent flier at the newly renovated airport themed Brook Street Park with his soon to arrive baby sister as he eagerly awaited the beginning of his TK tenure at Lafayette Elementary School. He resided on Chestnut Street with his parents Audrey and Conor Curtin and was known for stealing the hearts and minds of those in his neighborhood with his cuteness until last summer when his family made the difficult decision to relocate to Ireland.

"While David wasn't old enough to attend the Lafayette School District yet, when we were looking to buy a home, this was a huge factor," Audrey Curtin says. "One house we were about to make an offer on was in Lafayette but was a part of another district which meant I would've had to petition for him to attend the high school down the road from our (would've been) home. It seemed crazy to me that we would make our housing decision based on where my less than 2-year-old son (at the time) would go to high school, but I definitely felt pressure to make sure we were in a good school district."

The Curtin family loved their neighbors and the Lafayette community as a whole, but like many they just couldn't find a way to get ahead or to put down roots here. "We both were working more than 40 hours per week. We employed a full time nanny and we still didn't have enough time to cover work hours, let alone do things like grocery shopping and appointments," Curtin says. "Even though we both had good jobs, our employer health insurance was incredibly expensive and with Conor's autoimmune disorders we ultimately decided that we needed access to more affordable health care (and in closer proximity to Conor's family)." Access to more affordable childcare, healthcare, and, of course, housing are things Curtin says might've made staying a more viable option. Yet, Curtin knows her family's experience is not an anomaly. "Most of the families I met during my time in Lafayette were all very budget conscious and looking for a way to save money on everyday items (on everything from) commuting to work to school clothes, groceries and baby gear," Curtin recalls. "Those who stay are making great sacrifices to do so."

For those who aren't able to find affordable housing within the Lafayette School District, Richard Whitmore, outgoing Lafayette School District Superintendent, says not to count on interdistrict transfers and not to assume this is the only district offering quality education. "Interdistrict transfers have to be approved first by the district of residence and then by the receiving district. Our policy and practice has been to accept these transfers only in very limited circumstances with qualifying requirements," Whitmore says. "We have great confidence in our neighbors' ability to provide an excellent education to families who relocate." Whitmore reported that the Lafayette School District is down by some 54 kindergarteners for the upcoming academic year, but that the future looks bright for the district as a whole with 3,122 students already enrolled compared to the projected 3,033. The Lafayette School District worked with Davis Demographics to do an enrollment assessment and study. "Our last study was done seven years ago and the projections didn't seem to be playing out, so it was a good time to revisit," Whitmore says. "With the city's efforts to adopt a new housing element as part of their obligations, we wanted to better understand the impact new housing units might have on the district. The city has been anxiously awaiting the outcome of our study and we've shared it with them."

The study correlated the dip in kindergarten enrollment to a declining birthrate. "The birth rate five years prior was 89.3 of the "base year" the study used, so that is evidence that we would expect a smaller incoming kindergarten cohort," Whitmore says. However, it's unclear how or if statistical nuances for families like the Curtins who might move into the area with visions of someday being a part of the reputable school district and move back out when buying a home is not financially viable are reflected. Whitmore says the formal study projected additional students for the 376 new housing units, but the numbers are still inconclusive as it doesn't reflect units and projects in places like the Terraces not yet completed. Nevertheless, the new housing projects are not likely to have a huge impact on student enrollment numbers. "The new housing is only anticipated to add fewer than 60 students, as our experience so far is that multi-family housing or condominiums does not generate large numbers of students," Whitmore says. While the dense housing projects may provide more options for living in the community, it's important to note that just a handful of units are being made available at below market rate while the rest are selling in the \$1-\$2 million range and include homeowner association fees. This reality is what has families exploring alternative locations, and in the case of the Curtins, moving across the world in hopes of building a more sustainable future while clinging tightly to memories of Lafayette. "We loved our neighborhood and our neighbors, but over the years we could see a change in young families getting pushed out due to rents increasing. If we were able to get a home at a reasonable rate, we probably would've stayed," Curtin says. "We miss our amazing Lafayette community."

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