

Quick Fix or Long Wait?

Generous offer from the county may derail plans for a South County middle school.

By Amber Healy

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With budget votes due in April for both the Board of Supervisors and the School Board, a new sense of urgency has gripped the southern part of the county over the possibility of a middle school in Lorton. Some time last week, however, an offer was made by County Executive Anthony Griffin to provide \$10 million toward the construction of a new wing onto South County Secondary School, which could eliminate a boundary study in the fall and potentially delay, if not dash, the hopes for the construction of a separate middle school.



Fairfax County Public Schools Chief Operating Officer Dean Tistadt considers the offer as the best possible option for South County residents.

"This wing would provide the relief the school needs," Tistadt said. He allows that should the area continue to grow rapidly or if Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) changes at Fort Belvoir cause a large influx of students, the middle school would remain on the Capital Improvement Plan. The school might still be built, but Tistadt has maintained that the area just does not have the population to mandate a middle school and a high school.

South County, which was built with a core capacity of 2,500 students, is already several hundred students over capacity. To address this, a boundary change was made in February 2007 to send some students to Hayfield Secondary School. Another boundary study this fall has been discussed, with the possibility of sending some students to Lake Braddock Secondary School. However, if the wing is approved, that boundary study would most likely not happen.

The wing would also eliminate the nine-period day established at South County to provide a better learning environment for the students, Tistadt said.

"If you look at the pros and cons of the situation, the middle school won't happen now because we don't have the money to build it," he said. "This would provide almost immediate relief."

If approved, the wing would open in time for the 2010-11 school year, he said.

School Board member Elizabeth "Liz" Bradsher (Springfield) believes the wing may be best for her community.

"Now is the time for our elected officials to put all their cards on the table," she said. "We've got to get some budget restraints on both the county and School Board sides. It's up to the Board of Supervisors to help us find a way."

Bradsher said the offer of \$10 million was made by the county executive as a way to assist the school, but the decision to accept the money will be up to the School Board.

While Bradsher said the wing may be the favored option for those in the community who are "tired" and eager for any solution, she knows her constituents have been working long, hard hours for a middle school for several years and may refuse to accept anything else.

"Many people will want to hold out for a middle school, but there are also many people who want to move forward," she said. "I want to wait and see how the next several weeks play out."

THE WING would provide up to 35 classrooms and some additional laboratory space, along with extra room in the cafeteria, she said.

"It's a hard decision. I look at Lake Braddock and they believe their school is at capacity," she said. "I know that West Springfield High School needs repairs, they've got a class that meets in the hallway because they don't have room. I have to look at what we can do right now to best assist these schools."

School Board Chairman Dan Storck (Mount Vernon) said approving a wing might mean the middle school is not built.

"If we do make these changes, the odds of the middle school being built in the next 10 years is not very likely," he said. "I'm willing to talk about it, but I'm not very comfortable [with the addition]. The county's offer needs to be considered, but I have to think about what is the best approach."

Storck would rather have the \$10 million put into a fund to build the school instead of adding on to South County, which he said would go against the county's policy of making schools too large. If the wing is approved, the school could serve up to 3,100 students.

Supervisor Pat Herrity (R-Springfield) agrees with Storck and would rather see the money used on a new school.

"If the county can come up with \$10 million for an addition, why not use that money to start construction?" he asked. "We will still have high school students and middle school students mixing in the hallways. It does not solve the problem. It's a short-sighted solution."

Herrity said he has been involved with ongoing talks with Supervisor Gerry Hyland (D-Mount Vernon), other county officials and U.S. Rep. Tom Davis (R-11) to figure out a public-private partnership possibly involving another land swap similar to the one that helped fund the construction of South County Secondary School, but he declined to share any details on what that deal may involve.

"I'm working hard for a creative public-private education agreement solution, I think that's the best way to go," Herrity said.

Hyland, who has long said he wants to see a middle school on the land next to South County, maintains that is the only solution for him.

"I know [Davis] is willing to help us with changes to some legislation if he can, if we need help getting land for the school," Hyland said. "He's been very positive about this possibility and so am I."

A middle school is his preferred answer and will remain so, Hyland said.

"A school of 3,100 students is not optimal for education," he said. "This wing is a short-term solution that would take care of capacity in the short-term, but it is by no means the desired solution."

Christine Morin, a Laurel Hill resident who has spearheaded the Middle School Solutions group in lobbying for construction of the school, said the idea of a wing may sound appealing, but it is not the answer.

"Building South County Middle School is the only solution. Adding a wing, more trailers or dividing our communities are all band aid approaches that fail to address the real needs of our children," Morin wrote in an e-mail. "We have been working for several years to find a solution to the overcrowding in South County and we are closer now than we ever have been to getting the middle school, even more so with the \$10 million the county has identified. This problem won't go away until South County Middle School is built, and neither will we."