

Overcrowding prompts rally for a new school

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Fairfax -

Southern Fairfax County residents fed up with sending their kids to one of the county's most overcrowded schools plan to rally this month in the hopes of prompting the construction of a new facility.

South County Secondary School was never meant to handle the nearly 3,000 students that walk its hall each day, officials acknowledge. And efforts to alleviate the problem in the two years since the school opened – including a boundary change and trailers – haven't worked.

It's why some want to move up to 2012 a project that's now buried on the county's wish list of construction plans: the South County Middle School.

"The numbers are there, the students are there," said Christine Morin, the co-chair of the South County Middle School Solutions Group whose children attend a feeder school in the area. "The school needs to be built."

The group is organizing a rally for Oct. 24 at South County Secondary. Morin said she hopes to bring out a crowd of 600, large enough to pack the school's auditorium.

The planned facility now sits on the school system's capital improvements plan that maps out potential construction projects from 2013 to 2017. Morin argues the \$70 million-plus school could be tens of millions cheaper if it's brought to fruition sooner. Land, she said, is already set aside on the site of the former Lorton prison.

Dan Storck, the chairman of the county's school board who represents the district that encompasses the school, acknowledged South County Secondary's overcrowding problem. But trying to change the capital improvements plan will be difficult, he said, considering the competing construction and renovation needs throughout the county.

"I think it's very doable," he said. "The challenge is finding the money to be able to do it. That's the core question."

Whether the area will bear the brunt of a massive influx of new students in the next few years is highly disputed. The Army, which is preparing nearby Fort Belvoir for 19,000 new workers as part of federal base realignment and closure orders, has dramatically reduced its estimates of 3,200 school-aged children moving into the area down to essentially nothing. County and school officials doubt that sudden reduction.

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