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Search Is On For Money To Build Middle School

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The [Fairfax County School Board](#)'s decision last week to pursue construction of a middle school in Lorton rather than a less costly addition to ease crowding at South County Secondary School leaves open the question of how the new building will be funded.

The school system's construction plan does not include funding for a middle school in south county until 2017, and the district's chief operating officer, [Dean Tistadt](#), had advised that an addition to the school would be sufficient. But the board's 8 to 4 vote early Friday morning reflected the view that the area needs a separate school much sooner.

"There are still many steps to go, but the most important one has been made: The School Board has committed to build the middle school by 2012," said board [Chairman Daniel G. Storck](#), whose Mount Vernon district includes South County Secondary.

Circumventing the school system's priority list for funding is not unprecedented, but it is politically challenging in a 165,700-student school system with many competing needs.

[Stuart D. Gibson](#) (Hunter Mill), who voted against the middle school, said that school construction is a "zero-sum game." He said: "Every dollar that goes to a south county middle school is a dollar that will not go" to renovate or build another school.

The board is seeking a plan that would have the least effect on other schools. For example, the board's motion specifies that the new middle school, which Tistadt said could cost up to \$50 million, cannot displace any projects already funded through voter-approved bonds.

The board's vote was a victory for many community activists and political officials in southern Fairfax who have lobbied for a middle school since 2005, when the secondary school opened near capacity. From then on, the school has only grown. The School Board moved some students out later, but enrollment for the 2007-08 school year was nearly 3,000 students in a building designed for 2,500.

The middle school project garnered attention from many public officials, including the county Board of Supervisors, which unanimously approved \$10 million over two years in additional funding to construct a separate in southern Fairfax. The School Board also set aside \$2 million this year for the middle school in its construction budget.

To build on that sum, school officials are considering a loan with deferred payments or private funding. One developer has submitted a proposal that would offset costs for the school in exchange for land to develop. Another proposal is forthcoming, school officials said.

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The school system owns 35 acres near the secondary school that have been designated for a middle school. Some scenarios include swapping the property with the [Fairfax County Park Authority](#), which owns land right next to South County Secondary. Such an exchange could lower the price tag of construction, because the schools could share athletic fields or other facilities.

The board's motion authorized planning officials next year to move up the middle school in the construction plan and to document which projects would be displaced or delayed as a result. The plan is reviewed on a regular basis to reflect changing needs.

Community members concerned about the condition of their schools will be following the process closely.

Linda MacKinnon, a Springfield mother of three, has been lobbying for renovations at [West Springfield High School](#) that many parents say are long overdue. She said that building a middle school in south county is "fiscally irresponsible" because crowding could have been addressed by drawing new boundaries, a premise echoed by some School Board members.

But many residents in southern [Fairfax County](#) maintain that the school system has responded far too slowly to the population boom that followed the closing of prison facilities in Lorton and development of the surrounding area. Staff projections repeatedly underestimated the number of new students in the region.

Storck said the staff's current projections failed to consider growth likely to result from plans to realign the region's military bases. Those plans could bring a wave of students to neighborhoods around Fort Belvoir.

Efforts to accelerate construction of the middle school are following a precedent set by South County Secondary, which was supposed to open later than it did. Community activists and some public officials recognized the demand for the school and secured private funding to help open it sooner.

Christine Morin, co-chairman of a group that has advocated for the middle school, said she was thrilled to see that the School Board understands that south county "is a growing and new community that needs a community school."

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