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SCHOOL BOARD NARROWS OPTIONS
JODI DEAL / Staff Writer

WISE — The county school board has narrowed its list of options for the county's six high schools to two specific plans — three consolidated high schools or a hybrid system of renovation and new construction that would keep schools in each incorporated town.

On a motion by District One board member Barry Nelson, the board voted 6-2 last night to form a committee to evaluate all costs for either consolidating or the hybrid renovation/new construction plan. The committee will consist of two board members — Nelson and Chairman Ted Thompson — the superintendent or interim superintendent, Director of Finance Ron Vicars and Director of Secondary Education Gene Rowland.

That committee will be charged with coming up with a full cost comparison of the two options — taking into account all aspects of school operations — no later than September. They'll be allowed to "utilize other educational consultants," including Superintendent Greg Killough, who's leaving the school system at the end of this month. His severance package, approved earlier this month, includes \$50,000 for "future services."

Vanessa Perry of District Four and Betty Cornett of District Three voted against the new high school study.

THREE NEW, THREE RENOVATED

The hybrid plan includes building mostly new facilities in Wise, Coeburn and Powell Valley, renovating schools in Pound and Appalachia and putting light renovations to St. Paul High School on the school system's long-term capital projects list.

Nelson first suggested the hybrid plan, which may also include combining elementary and high school administrations in smaller communities, in March. The school board agreed in May to allow Killough to look into it further.

Monday night, Killough told the school board that through consultation with architects and review of previous studies, he believes that the following plan could be accomplished for about \$74 million:

Renovate Appalachia and Pound. Both buildings would be brought up to current code fire and accessibility standards, air conditioned and would get new windows, plumbing, lighting and dropped ceilings. Asbestos would be removed.

J.J. Kelly High School would essentially be rebuilt on its current site, with no existing facilities identified for reuse.

Coeburn High School would also essentially be rebuilt on site, but the existing gym would be saved, and no auditorium would be built. Students would continue using Coeburn Middle School's auditorium.

Powell Valley High School would be mostly rebuilt on site, but its gym would be saved and renovated, along with its auditorium and choral and band complex. The current cafeteria would be preserved and expanded.

Minor upgrades at St. Paul High School may be targeted for "energy performance contracts," through which the utility savings of efficient plumbing, lights and heating, ventilation and cooling systems are used to pay leases on the newer, efficient equipment.

Killough didn't provide a breakdown in the board's meeting information packet or during his presentation of how much the proposed improvements at each school site would cost.

All new construction and renovations will be designed to served the current number of students enrolled in each school.

COMPILING INFORMATION

Cornett was adamant that previous studies of high school options and any future examination of a consolidation plan won't be accurate until sites are picked for the new schools.

Site preparation costs, athletic facilities, transportation and infrastructure needs will all be affected by school sites, she said. Without that information, Cornett says she doesn't believe any comparison will be without hidden costs.

Schedule modeling, extracurricular activities, use of technology to reduce the necessary number of teachers and every other aspect of operation previously studied will be examined by the committee, Killough said.

Board member Phillip Bates said calling the committee's work a "study" isn't accurate.

"This is compelling information. It's taking two plans, which we've whittled down from four or five plans, and taking two final things for a side-by-side comparison," Bates said.

That's right, Nelson said. The goal is to show savings and additional costs associated with each plan to show which is best, he added.

"We've already had data gathered by architects and experts in our central office," Nelson added, later noting, "it's not rocket science."

Perry questioned the notion of using consultants that might cost the school system more money.

Thompson explained that the school board would have to approve hiring any consultants. Monty Salyer of District Four chimed in, pointing out that Killough's severance package includes consulting services.

"It does," Thompson said. "And we will utilize that."

Mike Mullins of District Two, who made a failed motion to study consolidation in March, said he's in favor of studying another option as long as the board's doing something.

"We've spun our wheels and we'll do it until the next generation comes along unless we do something tonight," Mullins said. He added later that those in favor of and opposed to consolidation with each have to give a little. "We cannot continue to tear the county apart the way we have."