

"Committee's Plan Backed by Solid Research"

By Howard Crouse, Superintendent

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On April 5, Indian Prairie will ask its voters to approve a \$130.5 million referendum. This referendum is the outgrowth of recommendations made by a 43-member citizens advisory committee that reported its findings to the Board of Education in January.

The citizens committee did an outstanding job with a difficult task. Moreover, the committee was determined to insure that its recommendations were based on independent evaluation of the information available and its members' feel for the pulse of the community. The best example of their commitment is the committee's diligence in reviewing enrollment projections, not only from the district but also from outside sources.

After five weeks of wrangling with numbers, of trying to predict how many residents will have students in various grade levels ten years from now, the committee agreed that it could substantiate a need for space to house 7,850 middle school students and 10,200 high school students. They recognized that these projections far exceed our current capacity.

At its public hearing prior to finalizing its recommendation, the committee heard very few people challenging those numbers as being too high. I believe this is because of the credibility of the committee and the determined effort they made to verify and justify every number.

Their extensive research and open discussion culminated in a recommendation to build a third high school for 3,000 students, while converting one of two freshman centers back into a middle school.

Four of our six middle schools will be over capacity by 2006. We expect to add portable classrooms at Scullen Middle School this fall. There are few options beyond portables that provide adequate housing, and limited space on which to put them. Ultimately, without the equivalency of another middle school, all six schools will be severely challenged. We will not allow one or two buildings to bear the burden of growth for an extended time while other buildings are below capacity. By converting one of the freshman centers, we address the middle school space needs at very little cost.

The district's January 31 enrollment report shows that we currently have 9,141 students in grades 2 through 5. However, we only have capacity for 8,400 high school students in our current configuration with two freshman campuses. Converting one freshman center to house the middle school students reduces high school capacity further to 7,200 students. The recommendation for a new third high school will meet the housing need at the high school level.

The committee reviewed other options, but came back to a basic belief that our high schools should not be any bigger. Instead of two high schools with more than 5,000 students each, the third high school gives us large but manageable sized high schools. One of the existing high schools will remain at a capacity of 4,200; the other two will be at 3,000.

The committee's recommendation is sound and educationally defensible. The enrollment projections are based on solid research and well-founded assumptions. The need for additional space is clear. Without the additional space, every middle and high school student will be affected.

At the board's town hall meeting in mid-January, someone in the audience of 300 people asked, "What is Plan B? What happens if this fails?" The board polled the audience and was told overwhelmingly that knowing the specifics of Plan B would not be perceived as a threat, but as solid information on which voters could make a rational choice.

Plan B is the subject of next month's column, appearing in this space on March 11.