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🔗 | [Back \(https://triblive.com/local/south-hills/baldwin-whitehall-to-build-new-elementary-school-with-48-million-price-tag/\)](https://triblive.com/local/south-hills/baldwin-whitehall-to-build-new-elementary-school-with-48-million-price-tag/) | Text Size: **— +**

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Baldwin-Whitehall School District plans to build a new \$48 million, 48-classroom elementary school to replace the aging W.R. Paynter Elementary.

District leaders recently announced plans for the new school, that also will address the district's fast-growing population needs. The building likely will open its doors in August 2023.

"It's really an exciting time," Superintendent Randal Lutz said. "Yes, it's demanding and, yes, it's going to cost money. But it's a resource that we can really latch onto as a community. Not many communities get a chance to build a new school. I think we should grab hold of the opportunity and make it something that's special and unique for what we're doing."

Baldwin-Whitehall leaders over the last few years have studied both the district's population and facilities needs. A demographic study indicated the district likely will see at least 1,000 new students over the next decade.

That hits the hardest in kindergarten through fifth grade, where enrollment is expected to go from 2,045 today to 2,372 in 2022-23. Already, enrollment is up by 80 students at the elementary schools between the end of 2018-19 and the start of 2019-20.

This can be attributed to more babies being born in the area, older people moving out and younger people moving in and more students staying in the district, as opposed to going to outside schools, Lutz said.

While the middle and high school buildings can handle the growth, the elementary schools are about 400 seats short, Lutz said.

District leaders looked at numerous options, also knowing that Paynter, which was built in 1969, was in need of "significant work," he said.

Paynter opened its doors as an open-concept middle school and in the 1980s transitioned to an elementary school. The building has had some "minor facelifts," but no major overhauls since.

"We know the roof is failing, nearly all the mechanical systems, boilers, HVAC, electrical, things of that nature, those are reaching the end of their useful life," Lutz said.

District leaders try to manage those issues, but, "it's not what we want for our children. Our children deserve better," Lutz said, talking about the roof leaking in classrooms and the gymnasium.

To simply renovate Paynter would cost \$32 million.

But the district also needs to add seats.

Some options looked at included a renovation of Paynter with a smaller addition for \$46 million, or renovations to the school with a larger addition for \$52 million. To build a 40-classroom building at Paynter, along with adding onto McAnnulty Elementary to meet growth needs, it also would cost \$52 million. With renovations, Lutz said, there also could be added costs that are unknown.

Building a new, 48-classroom school on Paynter's site was the cheapest option that met the district's growth needs, Lutz said.

Whitehall Elementary does not have the footprint to add on additional classrooms. McAnnulty's common spaces are not large enough to meet the needs of more students.

Paynter, which serves more than 800 students in K-5, has the land around it to accommodate a larger, new building, Lutz said. This plan also gives the district the opportunity to build a school made just for elementary students' needs today, he said.

Board members in June approved moving in this direction.

The site's topography is currently being reviewed, which may dictate where the building can be built. The hope is for construction to begin in March 2021.

It's anticipated that the structure will be built in the back of the property, taking up the parking lot and athletic fields, Lutz said. While under construction, students will be able to attend the classes in the current school.

Upon completion of the new building, plans are for the old Paynter to be torn down and parking and athletic fields added in its place.

With the new school, the district is reviewing its structure. Currently, K-5 students mostly north of Route 51 attend Paynter, while students on the other side of the district attend K-1 classes at McAnnulty and grades 2-5 go to Whitehall.

Lutz said focus groups that include teachers, parents and community members will review possible reorganization, along with possible redistricting.

Plans are to work through that decision making the first semester of 2019-20, so a preliminary design can be drafted. To design the building, Lutz said, it's important to know what grades will be attending the school.

To fund the school, the district is working with its financial advisors to set up a series of borrowings.

While state reimbursement for construction projects, known as PlanCon, is under a moratorium, Lutz said, there was a gap between June 30, 2018, and last September where there was a "period of silence" on the topic before the legislature extended the moratorium.

Baldwin-Whitehall submitted its application during that time and has since been accepted into the program, that could possibly reimburse the district for 20 percent of its construction costs, Lutz said.

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