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FEATURED

Directors discuss facility plan

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CONEMAUGH TOWNSHIP — A Blairsville-Saltsburg school board member presented a facility study on long-term capital improvements Tuesday, also outlining different options for the future, including redistricting to dissolve both Blairsville and Saltsburg schools and sending students to neighboring districts.

Rick Harper, speaking for the Building and Grounds committee, presented the results of the study by architectural firm HHSDR that showed \$17,044,000 in repairs and upgrades — if the board did everything in the plan.

He stressed that “they’ve built the Taj Mahal” and it’s the board’s job to decide what is a “must have” versus what is “nice to have.”

The study looked at the district’s buildings’ exterior and interior, HVAC, plumbing and electric.

It showed the following cost breakdown by school:

- Blairsville Elementary School, \$1.9 million (\$440,000 for exterior work; \$486,600 for interior; \$744,000 for HVAC; \$36,000 for plumbing, and \$208,000 for electrical)
- Blairsville Middle/High School, \$6.5 million (\$1,350,000 exterior; \$1,613,600 interior; \$2,507,000 HVAC; \$60,000 plumbing; and \$1,060,000 electrical)
- Saltsburg Elementary School, \$1.3 million (\$1,185,000 HVAC; \$160,000 electrical)
- Saltsburg Middle/High School, \$4.1 million (\$3,024,000 HVAC; \$57,600 plumbing; and \$1,050,000 electrical)
- Construction of a baseball field at Blairsville, \$1.5 million
- Blairsville stadium improvements, \$948,000
- Saltsburg stadium improvements, \$660,000

Harper focused on a six-year plan with a total estimated cost of \$8,268,000, which covered necessary improvements to the buildings and grounds.

In the six-year plan, the district would have work done that ranged in cost from \$1.1 million to \$1.75 million each year, covering items such as windows, HVAC and other issues.

He said he’d like to pare down the cost of the six-year plan to \$6.5 million to \$7 million.

Part of the study looked at school capacity.

Harper reported that the Blairsville buildings are considered 40 percent vacant and Saltsburg buildings are considered 47 percent vacant according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's formula for capacity, taking into account that 25 students will fit in a classroom. Overall, the district is considered to be 43.5 percent vacant.

Capacity and enrollment are as follows:

- Blairsville Elementary School, capacity 625, enrollment as of October, 446
- Saltsburg Elementary School, capacity 400, enrollment 247
- Blairsville Middle/High School, capacity 947, enrollment 502
- Saltsburg Middle/High School, capacity 635, enrollment 305

He asked the board if they really wanted to “sink millions” into buildings considered that vacant, and presented what he believes could be other options.

Harper's other options — which he stressed were not proposals or up for vote, but rather just for discussion — were consolidation, building a central middle/high school, crossover busing, keeping the status quo or redistricting.

He focused on redistricting.

Harper said his opinion is to take students living in Loyalhanna Township to the Greensburg Salem School District, take students in Saltsburg and Conemaugh Township to Apollo-Ridge, and to combine the Blairsville end of the district with nearby Homer-Center School District, building a new middle-high school in between the two communities.

He said he was “trying to think of a long-term model of sustainability.”

Harper reviewed the distances students would have to travel under this scenario.

From the farthest point in Loyalhanna Township, students would travel eight miles to Metzgar Elementary and 15 miles to Greensburg Salem. In Saltsburg/Conemaugh Township, it would be 11 miles to Apollo-Ridge.

For Blairsville, students would be at campuses 7 miles apart down Route 119, which would enable them to share resources such as teachers who could travel between the campuses.

Harper was upfront about the cons of this plan, which he said would include a loss of jobs and a loss of identity for both ends of the district, and noted that it would have to be a state decision.

An aspect he believed would not go over well is the loss of identity to all of the schools, as there would be no more Saltsburg Trojans, Blairsville Bobcats or Homer-Center Wildcats.

It would also leave empty buildings on both sides of the district.

Regarding pros of the plan, he projected that for tax purposes, Blairsville and Homer-Center pay around the same in taxes, and Saltsburg would see a decrease of 5 to 6 percent.

He also noted that the move would make more courses available to students.

The Blairsville-Saltsburg School District has 85 courses for high school students, he said. At Greensburg Salem, there are 111 options, and at Apollo-Ridge, there are 106.

Harper's presentation was not up for a vote, and he noted that he wanted to make it clear to the public that if the board moves forward with plans for millions in repairs, they would be doing so to buildings that are 40 percent empty.

His presentation "stunned" F. Dan McGregor and other members of the Petrarca Committee and Save Our Schools — groups that have been working with the board to try to separate the district into two entities through legislation — who were in attendance Tuesday.

McGregor said he was in "total shock," saying Harper's presentation on redistricting was akin to talk of consolidation, which his groups oppose.

"It's the same pig in a different dress with a different color lipstick," he said.

"Why have we given up on the concept of separation?" he asked.

The board voted for separation in 2015 in an ongoing process that would require legislation to be introduced to dissolve the district and form two new ones.

McGregor called for the separation plan to continue so that Saltsburg and Blairsville could both decide their own future.

State Rep. Joe Petrarca, D-Vandergrift, who represents Saltsburg Borough, was also in attendance and said he continues to receive calls from residents, teachers and even a few students wondering what the future holds for the district.

“I want to do what’s right for this entire district,” he said.

He said he believes Harper’s redistricting plan would be difficult for the communities, and that he also doesn’t believe consolidation is the answer.

He also said another option would be to legislate status quo in the district, which he believes would make a lot of the tension go away.

People are concerned that down the line, a new board would float the idea of consolidation.

“Separation has always seemed to make sense to me,” Petrarca said. “I remain committed to that.”

Margaret Weaver

Margaret Weaver has served as a Gazette staff writer since 2006. She covers Clymer Borough, the Blairsville-Saltsburg School District and Blairsville court, and also works in the areas of layout, design and editing.