Union schools weigh options
District to decide on practicality of maintaining 3 buildings

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The feasibility of maintaining three school buildings amid a decline in student enrollment has Union School District pondering the future, which could include closure of one of those buildings.

“We really haven’t had this type of forum before, so we weren’t sure what to expect,” Superintendent, Jean Mc-Cleary said during a public hearing to discuss the matter Tuesday night in Union High School’s cafeteria. “We’re glad with the turnout because it shows that parents aren’t apathetic.”

The district, made up of two elementary schools and one high school, is struggling with construction costs of between nearly $600,000 and several million dollars for each of the three schools, according to a feasibility study done by HHSR of Sharon. The school district previously worked with the group in 2008.

According to a presentation made at the forum, enrollment at nearly every grade level was much lower than the projected study estimated. Each of the district’s three buildings is operating well under capacity. The district, which has the ability to support nearly 1,200 students, has only 534.

“We looked at the numbers in 2008, and now we’re at that crossroads we have to decide,” Mc-Cleary said. Although the superintendent said the enrollment numbers are continuing to decline, she did not anticipate a decision on the future of the school district during the remainder of this month or April. She also said with certainty that whatever the decision is on the district, students would not be affected this school year.

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Mc-Cleary said that Union School District is the only one of its size in the area that still operates three school buildings. The district sends students in kindergarten through third grade to Sligo Elementary School, fourth through sixth grades to Rimersburg Elementary School and seventh through 12th grades to Union High School in Rimersburg.

Five options on the district’s future were presented during the meeting.

Option 1
Update and maintain all buildings. The estimated cost of that option is $3.8 million for Rimerburg, $4 million for Sligo and $8.3 million for Union.

Options 2 and 4
Update and convert Sligo to kindergarten through fourth grade. Update and convert Union to fifth through 12th grade. Those options include closing Rimersburg.

Mc-Cleary explained that the difference between options 2 and 4 would be the level of upgrades to the buildings. Option 2 would cost an estimated $4.2 million for Sligo improvements and $8.9 million for Union upgrades. Option 4 would cost $587,000 for upgrades to Sligo and $2.56 million for work on Union.

Option 3
Update and convert Sligo to kindergarten through fourth grade. Update and convert Union to fifth through 12th grades. Close Rimersburg and construct an auditorium addition to Union. That option would be getting more services if we move to only two locations.

Option 5
Update and convert Sligo to kindergarten through fifth grade. Update and convert Union to sixth through 12th grades. Close Rimersburg. That option would cost about $4.2 million for Sligo and $8.9 million for Union.

The superintendent said the decision to keep a school building in use in both Sligo and Rimersburg was a conscious one.

“We felt a school presence in both communities, and we wanted to keep a key building in both places,” Mc-Cleary said.

She added that the cost of needed repairs was about the same for each building, with the exception of a new roof that had been upgraded last year on Sligo.

Mc-Cleary said that although options have been presented, there is no clear timeline for a decision. She indicated that the school board has given her a directive to start looking into a possible sixth option.

She said the option would include additional construction of buildings at Sligo.

“Then would be an additional cost,” Mc-Cleary said.

Regardless of the option chosen, all current teachers would retain their jobs and students would continue to receive the same education, according to Mc-Cleary.

“Locations would be the only thing changing (in four of the five options),” she said. “The way I see it, our students would be getting more services if we move to only two locations.”

Some staff members must currently split time between all three buildings. Mc-Cleary said in addition to splitting less time, merging buildings would also allow for additional staff members, specializing in specific areas.

Other adjustments, like busing, would also be needed with a possible building merger, but Mc-Cleary said it would be minor.

“The school board is still doing their due diligence because this is a major decision,” she said. “All the options are still on the table.”

Mc-Cleary said several possibilities have been discussed in the event that Rimersburg closes.

The building could be sold or it could be razed, but Mc-Cleary said those options wouldn’t be.

“We don’t want to see the community park or fields decline,” she said.

Mc-Cleary added that the option of selling the building but retaining the parking lot and fields has been discussed.

“In our little town we want to be wise about property value,” she said.

During the meeting, parents addressed concerns about merging schools, which mainly revolved around the age difference between a sixth-grade student and a high school senior.

Teachers would continue to monitor common areas, and the building would be split into two areas, Mc-Cleary said. The first level of the high school would be used primarily by the middle school students and the upper level would be used for the older students.

“It would be the same age difference for a sixth-grader and a senior as it would be a sixth-grader and a kindergartner,” the superintendent said. “They already ride the same bus.”

“As superintendent, I’m passionate about our school district,” Mc-Cleary said. “We will ensure quality education and care for our students whatever that means.”