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Schools chief: Building projects are on track

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WISE — Despite recent estimates that an ambitious school construction campaign could cost as much as \$63.8 million, school officials are proclaiming that final estimates are now \$1.9 million less.

The county school board and board of supervisors met last night to hear and discuss updates, including costs, regarding the four school construction projects.

Schools Superintendent Jeff Perry had requested that both boards convene. “It’s our hope tonight that we can provide information concerning each one of the capital building programs,” he said. “We know that we’ve had a great deal of information out in the communities, some of that information has been accurate, some of it has not been as accurate as we had hoped that it would be, so we want to provide the board members with the most up-to-date information that we have so that you can give your constituents accurate information when asked.”

The only official who did not attend was school board Member Mark Hutchinson who had a prior work commitment.

COSTS

Perry briefly revisited the original \$60 million budget that had been established for all four projects, which include building a new gym at Appalachia Elementary School, renovating Eastside High School and constructing new Union and Central high schools.

That initial estimate began increasing as several amenities were added at Central and Union — including more classroom space and a bigger gym/auditorium — and as the site location for Central High fluctuated. At one point, the school was to be built at a site near the central office, then at a site behind the existing school. A final decision was made recently to build the school at a location above the Norton Commons shopping center. This latest change raised the overall capital project budget to \$63.8 million.

But Perry said through conversations with engineers and architects and through negotiations with Ballard Construction — contractor for the Central and Union projects — that price has dropped to \$61.9 million. Perry said Ballard found ways to perform some of the work at a lesser cost, as well as assumed some of the work the school system was initially going to perform.

“We’re coming up with just \$1.9 million, which we think is actually pretty good,” he said. “When you take \$700,000 out of that for the purchase of the land, actually the schools are only \$61.2 million, so we’re only \$1.2 million over. So the thing that we have done is that we have been very conscientious about this, and I think that we probably had the authority to go ahead and spend that \$3.8 million, but we told the board that we would be conscientious about this and that if we could save money, we would, and we’ve done that.”

While the cost for the new high schools has increased from \$44 million to \$45.6 million, Perry said there has been no change in the Appalachia Elementary gym project, which is expected to cost \$1.5 million, or the Eastside High renovations, which are expected to cost \$8.5 million.

Bids for the Eastside project are due today, and Perry noted that school officials will have to wait until these bids are received to establish a final cost. Thompson & Litton of Wise, the Eastside architect, told Perry that four contractors requested information about the project.

NEW GYM

Perry said work on the new 11,000-square-foot Appalachia Elementary gym is on budget and on schedule. When finished, the gym will seat 350 and boast a regulation basketball court with six goals, as well as hardwood flooring, dressing rooms, a P.E. office, equipment storage, volleyball standards and a concession area. The project is expected to finish by January.

Perry reported that new water and sewage lines have been laid, rough grading has been completed, footings have been poured and masonry wall construction has begun.

EASTSIDE

The Eastside High project will involve renovating 65,000 square feet of existing space and adding 18,000 square feet of new space.

New construction will include a front entrance, administrative wing, science labs, improved traffic/parking patterns and a 3,800-square-foot media center.

Perry noted that transitioning the school's operations to St. Paul High School for the 2012-13 school year is going well. The school board previously agreed to move the school's students to St. Paul High School and St. Paul Elementary School next year during the renovation project.

Perry said the project is slated to finish in August 2013, which is when students will return to Coeburn.

NEW SCHOOLS

When finished, Union and Central high schools will boast 127,000 square feet each. Amenities will include an auditorium that can seat 800 people, a gym that can seat 1,500, a cafeteria that can seat 250, as well as 24 general classrooms, a 2,400-square-foot media center, six science classrooms and two labs, six computer labs, choral, art and band rooms, among other features.

Perry said both schools will essentially cost the same amount, though Central's budget is slightly higher due to the \$700,000 cost of the 25-acre site, as well as additional site work.

Perry said work is progressing at Union High, though the project is about three weeks behind schedule due to rainy weather. Foundation work is approximately 80 percent complete.

Perry said all trees and shrubs have been removed from the Central site and some preliminary dozer work has been finished. School officials are now acquiring all necessary building permits and acquiring the appropriate initial zoning — the property has never been zoned.

Dynamic compaction will be needed over the entire footprint of the school, and schools Director of Business/Finance Ron Vicars estimates this will cost \$120,000 to \$150,000.

Perry said he still hopes that both high schools will open in January 2014. If the area continues to receive frequent rain, however, that target date might have to be moved back.

RESPONSE

Both boards asked several questions, including whether the existing Union High gym will be demolished along with the school — it will — and whether the existing Central High will be demolished — it won't.

Several officials asked about the road situation regarding the new Central High. Supervisor J.H. Rivers and school board member Betty Cornett asked whether an entrance off Route 757 was part of the plan. Perry said nothing has been budgeted for an additional entrance off Route 757, and the only entrance for now will be located off Industrial Drive. Perry noted, however, that county officials are working with property owner George Barnette — whose property abuts the Central High acreage — to obtain an easement through his property.

If the school system ever decided to install another entrance, obtaining an easement from Barnette would make the process much easier. Perry said the Virginia Department of Transportation has plans to make improvements along 757, and he would like to obtain an easement through Barnette's property so that VDOT can make improvements that include another road coming off 757. If an easement is not obtained and the school system decides later to install a second entrance, Perry said it could cost the county a lot more money since it would have to make those improvements itself.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Bob Adkins said negotiations with Barnette continue. He noted that Barnette seems favorable about the easement.

Cornett asked whether Barnette had indicated he wanted money for the easement. Adkins replied that Barnette had indicated he did not want money, though a land swap had been discussed.