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At a glance

Proposals from the Guilford County Schools bond planning worksheet:

Southeast High School, \$27,919,306 for classrooms, media center and gym

Southeast Middle School, \$9,616,825 for auxiliary gym, media and dining expansion

Southeast area K-8, \$29,787,050 for new school, including cost of site

Alamance Elementary, \$24,250,328 for addition, demolition and renovations to convert the school to a K-8

K-8 school plan concerns SEAC

By Kim Cable Brafford

Forest Oaks Community Association

The Guilford County Board of Education has responded to calls from the Southeast for new and improved schools, but its proposal to create a K-8 school worries leaders of the Southeast Educational Advancement Coalition.

The school board released a 2007 bond planning worksheet that calls for renovating Southeast High School and Middle School, converting Alamance Elementary into a kindergarten through eighth-grade school, and creating a new K-8 school.

On the face of it, the plan looks like it would lessen overcrowding and therefore perhaps boost the schools' ailing academic performances. But Alamance Elementary already has nearly double the number of students than schools with similar grade ranges in the district, and growth projections put 150 more students there within four years. Enrollment at Southeast Middle School also exceeds district and state averages, and is expected to include another 175 students by 2011.

The proposal "is not decreasing student population, but expanding grades," explains SEAC co-founder and Forest Oaks resident Linda Welborn. "Alamance is already too large to meet the needs of six different grade levels. This plan ... expands grade levels to nine different ones at a school that has not made Annual Yearly Progress goals for four years. Why would you do that to a school that is already struggling?"

SEAC maintains that building a new elementary school and a new middle school would be a better solution. "It's not cost-effective to renovate those old buildings," Linda says.

To handle the projected growth, SEAC's stance is that Alamance Elementary's 32-year-old building should be renovated and expanded to better provide for grades K-5. A new Southeast elementary school and Southeast middle school should be built to downsize both existing schools.

E.C. Huey, who is running for a Board of Education at-large seat in 2008, says building and converting schools to K-8 is a national trend, with published reports

asserting that test scores show better results in those schools.

He cites Johnson Street Global Studies, a magnet school in Guilford County, as a successful model of a local K-8 school.

But Linda points out that the student population at Johnson is under 400, less than half of Alamance Elementary's size. The class sizes are much smaller at an average of 20 students per class, and the faculty is as large as that of Alamance.

One reason for the shift to K-8 schools, Huey says, is that they help to curtail unruly middle school behavior.

But Linda says, "You're adding middle school students that are difficult into an already failing school." Besides, she says, "Our middle school doesn't have a major behavioral issue. If you don't really have a behavioral problem, and you're really not strengthening education, where's the advantage? Nowhere in this K-8 model do I see that they're raising the standard."

She also worries about how kids will perceive their schools, if some attend Southeast Middle School, devoted to older sixth- and eighth-graders, and others attend a K-8 school with younger children. SEAC's research shows that K-8 schools work better in smaller towns, where those schools would not co-exist with regular middle schools.

"Parents are very concerned about having their young children being exposed to certain behaviors of older, more mature children and the prospects of teasing and bullying," Linda says. "You now will have kindergarteners riding buses with sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders when there are already issues with fourth- and fifth-graders."

In email conversations with SEAC, candidate Huey says many K-8 schools have separate buildings or floors for the lower and middle school students.

SEAC also has concerns about extracurricular activities. With 300 middle school students at each K-8 and 600 middle school students at Southeast Middle School, there could be disparities among schools in after-school programs.

Students at SEMS are offered soccer, volleyball, football, cheerleading, wrestling, basketball, track, golf, baseball, softball, lacrosse and band. How would K-8 schools support all of those same programs?

"The high school and middle school are using their athletic facilities to capacity now," Linda says. "It is unrealistic to expect the K-8 schools to utilize these facilities."

Huey says, "I agree that sports and extracurriculars would be tricky to work out, but they probably could be worked out in time."

In the meantime, the directive from SEAC is clear. "The school board needs to recognize that the Southeast has not gotten any major capital improvements in 30 years," Linda says. "There is a lot of catch-up that is needed. If the school board is set on the K-8s, these issues must be addressed in complete detail to gain parental acceptance of the proposal."

She encourages parents to tell the school board your position, whether it's pro or con. You can write school board members through the Guilford County Schools Web site at www.guilford.k12.nc.us/boe/index.htm.