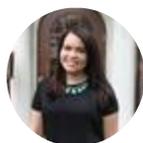


New school advocates cautiously optimistic about planning money for new Towson area high schools



Portables behind Towson High School in May. School officials are proposing \$15 million in planning money in the 2019 schools' budget for two Towson-area high schools, including a new Towson High. (Baltimore Sun Media Group)



By **Margarita Cambest**
Towson Times

JANUARY 15, 2018, 6:00 AM

After years of letter-writing campaigns and public speeches, Towson-area parents are one step closer to seeing their request for new schools granted.

The Baltimore County Board of Education announced last week that it is seeking \$15 million in the proposed fiscal year 2019 schools' budget to plan for two new Towson-area high schools.

The proposal includes planning money for a new Towson High School to replace the current structure and a second, new high school in the central-northeast area of the county, where parents have for years asked

officials to build new high schools to eliminate overcrowding and failing facilities.

It is the second stage in the process of funding Baltimore County Public Schools each year. In Baltimore County, the superintendent proposes a budget for each fiscal year — Interim Superintendent Verletta White last week presented a \$1.6 billion operating budget for next year — to be reviewed and adjusted by the school board, county executive and County Council. The 2019 fiscal year begins July 1.

According to Baltimore County Councilman David Marks, who represents Towson, an analysis of the Towson High School site is expected to be completed by April, with selection of an architect in May and the initiation of design for a new school in November.

"Towson has repeatedly proved itself to be an engaged community," Marks said in a Jan. 12 email. "The elected officials are successful because parents and other advocates make their presence known. Once the planning process starts, I expect lots of engagement as we create a modern Towson High School."

Advocates for a new Towson High School and Dulaney High School have been some of the most vocal in asking Baltimore County Public Schools to replace aging facilities, said Steve Prumo, a member of "New in '22."

The group, made up of parents and other community members, formed three years ago to convince Baltimore County officials to earmark funding in fiscal year 2019 to begin planning and design of a new Towson High that would be completed by 2022.

Group members say the existing high school is overcrowded and that its facilities are outdated. It ramped up its efforts in 2017 as parents complained of dilapidated electrical equipment, frequent flooding and mold.

Towson High was built in 1949 and is more than 200 students over capacity, according to its profile on the Baltimore County Public Schools website. Some students attend class in six portable buildings located behind the main school building.

The news that planning for a new building may start soon is "fantastic," Prumo said, adding that the real work begins now in figuring out how to accommodate more children in a plot that is landlocked by residential neighborhoods.

One solution to the problem could be to purchase neighboring properties, he said.

Prumo said he has started speaking with neighboring community associations and property owners to discuss the potential to expand Towson High's footprint.

Though it's still early stages, he would like to get ahead of issues that might prove to be stumbling blocks later in the year, he said.

"You just can't go to the supermarket and buy land like you can eggs," Prumo said. "You have to have people

willing to sell, and I'd like to help the county realize that solution sooner rather than later.”

However, while Towson High advocates says they're looking forward to getting the process going, advocates for a new Dulaney High School say they are still hoping their pleas are heeded.

Towson resident Yara Cheikh said she worried that the new school created to “alleviate overcrowding” in the central-northeast area would not be a direct replacement for Dulaney.

The school is about 90 students under capacity, according to its Baltimore County Public School's profile, with enrollment projected to grow in coming years.

The school system projects that Towson High will be 456 students over state-rated capacity by 2026, according to a Baltimore County news release. The same study indicates that Dulaney High School will be 188 students over state-rated capacity by 2026, and Perry Hall High at 234 students overcapacity.

The central-northeast school will be designed to eliminate the projected overcrowding at both high schools.

“Dulaney High School has nothing at this point,” said Cheikh, president of the Parent Teacher Association at Ridgely Middle School and a parent of a Dulaney High School junior.

In March, the Board of Education decided against \$40 million in renovation funding proposed by Baltimore County Executive Kevin Kamenetz in the fiscal 2018 county budget, citing advocates' desire for a new building. The county executive then cut the renovation money and diverted it to remaining elementary school construction projects in the county.

In September, Kamenetz, who is running for governor, announced that he would include planning money for the two new schools in his proposed fiscal year 2019 budget.

“At the Board of Education meeting they said this money could go to a new high school somewhere else, [but] there is no guarantee, promise or understanding that Dulaney High School is that school, ” Cheikh said.

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