

Two stakeholder groups pushing different visions for future of Towson High



Two stakeholder groups made up of parents and community members are pushing for different scenarios regarding the future of Towson High School. (File photo)



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While plans to replace Towson High School are still in the earliest stages, two groups made up of parents and community members, have already formed, each pushing for different solutions to rectify problems of overcrowding and failing infrastructure among others at the nearly 70-year-old school.

The first group calling themselves New in 22, formed in 2016, has rallied to see a new 1,800-seat high school built by 2022 with petition drives, letter campaigns and public comment at Baltimore County Public School meetings.

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of other parents and community members
of all stakeholders.

Although Evans Letocha's group does not have a "catchy name," she said, she and other members of her group would like to see a smaller Towson High School achieved to preserve the feeling of a smaller neighborhood school, with some members wanting to explore redistricting to achieve that goal. They also want to prevent building out too close to adjacent Herring Run stream and increase community involvement in the planning process for the community's new high school.

"The main difference between our group and New in 22 is that they are advocating for a new Towson High School building on the current site for 1800+ students as an outcome of the planning process," Evans Letocha said in a Jan. 29 email. "Our group wants to see a variety of options presented to the community through a process of community engagement."

"The more we started talking to each other and asking questions of elected officials, the more questions we had," Evans Letocha said last week. "We came to the realization that what New in 22 was proposing—a brand new 1,800 seat school—was not in the best interest of our children or the Towson community."

Towson High School currently holds about 300 students more than its state-projected capacity of 1,260 students. School officials project that number to swell to 1,800 in coming years, according to Baltimore County Public Schools data.

Parents say the school's facilities are failing students—pointing to photos of mold and water damage in the basement, the use of seven portable classrooms and insufficient extracurricular space for the school's growing population.

Since 2016, New in 22 has been behind an effort 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.

In September, Baltimore County County Executive Kevin Kamenetz, who is running for governor, announced he would earmark \$15 million in the FY 2019 budget to plan for a new Towson High School as well as another high school to serve the central, northeast part of the county — both to alleviate overcrowding.

The request for that funding is currently working its way through Baltimore County Public Schools' budget process.

Evans Letocha said she learned at a meeting this month between Baltimore County Public Schools and some members of the Towson High community, including New in 22 and other concerned parents, that plans could include tearing down the existing historic structure or building out the school's footprint farther into the residential neighborhoods that border the campus.

"Years ago the [Perry Hall] community wanted to add seats because nobody wanted to get redistricted out," Evans Letocha said. "Building out the school is not necessarily a better educational way Perry Hall has gotten too big."

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Perry Hall High School is now about 70 students shy of its 2,110 student capacity, according to its BCPS profile.

One option could be to renovate Towson High and build an additional school to serve overcrowding, Evans Letocha said, although she didn't say where the additional school should be built.

"Greater transparency and community input is the main focus right now," Evans Letocha said in a Jan. 24 email. "All options need to be part of the discussion."

The group would also like to see the preservation of the school's historic stone structure, Evans Letocha said. Built in 1949 according to its BCPS school profile, Towson High was added to Baltimore County's Final Landmarks List by the Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission and the Baltimore County Council in 2006.

New in 22 founding member Steve Prumo, said his group has spent the past few years considering the issues Evans Letocha's group is now raising, including the size of the school, its historic designation and how to better serve the community.

"I think the biggest concern [Evans Letocha's group has] is their kids having to go through another transition," he said referring to renovations in recent years at Towson High feeder schools Stoneleigh Elementary and Dumbarton Middle.

But he said, [Evans Letocha's group] "makes valid points—the county should engage the community but there needs to be some creativity around this."

New in 22 member Gretchen Maneval agreed.

"Our children and teachers and staff have extraordinary achievements academically and we need to work with Baltimore County Public Schools to make sure their learning environment is safe, innovative and honors their nationally ranked academics and achievements," Maneval said.

The school's L-shaped stone building sits on about 27 acres and is bounded by mature residential neighborhoods and Herring Run stream. Prumo said he expects the school will need to expand its acreage to serve the larger student population. He is preemptively researching nearby available properties that could be purchased for an expansion.

New in 22 is also considering how to best address Towson High School's landmark status, but the decision is ultimately up to Baltimore County Public Schools and Baltimore County's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

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removal of exterior architectural feature or
ial Landmarks list requires a permit which is

referred to the Landmarks Preservation Commission for review and approval.

The demolition of properties on the list will be considered only if the demolition is “more important than the loss of part of the county’s heritage,” according to the commission’s website.

“Should someone wish to alter or demolish the school, a permit must be requested in order to begin the review process,” Baltimore County spokeswoman Ellen Kobler said in a Jan 24 email. “To date, no permit has been referred to the Commission for review.”

BCPS executive director for facilities management Pete Dixit said the school system is working on a countywide high school capacity assessment study to analyze the condition and capacity needs of all schools and is just getting its “ducks in a row” in preparation to renovate or replace Towson High.

“It’s still early in the process, but we will keep the community engaged,” Dixit said. “The community will know exactly how we’re proceeding.”

This story has been updated.

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