

Consultant report calls for new Towson and Lansdowne high schools

BY LIBBY SOLOMON BALTIMORE SUN MEDIA GROUP

A consultant hired by the Baltimore County public school system to evaluate enrollment capacity and building shortfalls is recommending that the system construct new facilities to replace the existing Lansdowne and Towson high schools.

The recommendations from Sage Policy Group come after a study of projected overcrowding in county high schools, which are expected to see a 1,700-seat shortfall over the next decade. Sage officials say the months-long study included public meetings and weighed costs and community preferences in its analysis.

In a report on its findings, Sage lays out various scenarios to address overcrowding issues. The consultant says whether the school system embraces those scenarios completely or in part, “our analysis reveals that there are certain pressing priorities that should be addressed as soon as possible. Given the magnitude of the endeavor and uncertainties regarding the availability of state capital funds, it is conceivable that implementation will require two decades or more.”

The report is expected to be formally presented at a school board meeting Tuesday in Towson — the first meeting since the conversion to a hybrid board that has some members elected, others appointed.

It will be up to the board to decide whether or not to incorporate the Sage recommendations into its planning process — and into its budget request to newly elected County Executive Johnny Olszewski Jr.

The county estimates that building new high schools would cost more than \$100 million each.

“Ultimately it’ll be up for the board to debate and decide what to do next,” said schools spokesman Brandon Oland.

The report’s top recommendation is a new, 1,700-seat school to replace the current Towson High. The new school would add 440 seats.

Residents have weighed the need of a new facility at Towson against a desire for a school that remains somewhat small. In the report, Sage says the urgency for more seats tips the scale.

“Undoubtedly, there are many who would prefer a new but smaller Towson High School, but the central area [of the county] needs net new seats desperately,” the report says.

The report notes facility needs at two other schools in that area — Dulaney and Loch Raven high schools, which both received low scores in a 2014 facilities assessment. But it says Towson, originally built in 1949, has the greatest need.

“This is not to suggest that improvements are not required at Dulaney, Loch Raven, and elsewhere,” the report states. “Two of our scenarios call for a new school at Dulaney, and one calls for a major renovation. All three of the scenarios call for a new school at Loch Raven, which would also add many needed seats in the central area. ... However, Towson High School is deemed to be in slightly worse shape physically.”

Yara Cheikh, an advocate for a new Dulaney High School, said the report gave her pause because the Dulaney community has been calling for a new building four years ago. “How long do communities need to wait?” Cheikh asked.

The condition of the school also factors in the recommendation for Lansdowne. County officials had once decided that Lansdowne, built in 1963, would be the subject of a renovation, but parents and others in the community have lobbied for it to be replaced completely.

Sage’s recommendation to build a new Lansdowne High notes that the facility’s score in the 2014 assessment was 1.74 out of 5 points — ranking it the worst high school facility in the county.

“It would be difficult to find a [county public] high school in worse physical shape than Lansdowne,” the report states.

A decision to rebuild and enlarge Lansdowne High could relieve pressure at nearby Catonsville High School, which is projected to be overcrowded by nearly 500 students in the next decade. But that would be controversial; many Catonsville parents have said they do not want children reassigned to either Lansdowne or another area high school, Woodlawn.

“One could conceivably add seats at Catonsville, but it would be enormous and leave Lansdowne in its present state,” the Sage report states. “In our judgment, the better solution is a new Lansdowne to which a limited number of Catonsville students would be shifted.”

At a September public meeting on the study, Sage Policy CEO Anirban Basu suggested there was “no way to add [seats] to Catonsville without creating a gigantic high school. To avoid a gigantic high school, we’ve got to move kids.”

For some in the Lansdowne community, the recommendation is vindication of their longstanding belief that a new facility is needed.

“Bringing attention to Lansdowne High School gave every small town community a voice that the deplorable conditions of the learning environment is unacceptable,” wrote Dayana Bergman, a Baltimore Highlands resident and Lansdowne High advocate, in a Facebook post. “Sage Policy Group actually listened to everybody who participated and, as

challenging as it was, their recommendation is actually representing the voice of the people.”

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