

New committee to tackle school district's building needs

By Kevin Kelley

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WESTLAKE

The 24-member committee given the task of developing a plan to deal with the Westlake City Schools' overcrowding and aging buildings will hold its first meeting Tuesday at 6 p.m. at the Board of Education offices.

The 20/20 Vision Committee has been asked to present the Board of Education with one or two master plans by January, Superintendent Dan Keenan said at a public presentation Oct. 14 at Holly Lane Elementary School.

The district's seven school buildings are running short on space and have serious "brick and mortar" needs, Kennan said.

Keenan summarized three recent community forums at which the Westlake community was informed of the district's needs and consulted on possible solutions.

"I don't think (the feedback) was clear on what to do quite yet," Keenan said. "But we have to do something. I think people realize how (the problem) affects property values, how it affects education, how it affects the costs in the long run."

While the feedback didn't indicate a clear path to a solution, Keenan said some direction did emerge from the forums.

Members of the community said the district should pursue either a large-scale or incremental plan to solving its facility needs, Keenan said. Short-term fixes and patches will no longer satisfy, he said.

The high school building should be the top priority of all grade levels, according to feedback at the community forums.

One question the district must tackle is whether to abandon its current scheme of four neighborhood elementary schools in favor of one or two larger, but more cost efficient, elementary buildings. Keenan said people's views on the subject were mixed, but the greater concern seemed to be over costs.

"If we were talking to an elementary parent, we had a little bit stronger (feeling for) the neighborhood school," Keenan said. "But I think the overall response that we received tended to say 'go with the most economical plan and make sure that you maintain your educational excellence.'"

Safety, overcrowding, technology and energy efficiency were general areas people believed should be priorities as the district addresses its long-term building needs, the superintendent said.

Using a slide presentation, Keenan showed examples of the district's building problems. At Bassett Elementary School, a wall is "pulling away from the building's foundation. At Dover Elementary, some teachers' and administrators' desks are located in the hallways due to lack of space. A restroom at Westlake High School was closed to use as storage space. Leaking roofs are a problem at several buildings, Keenan said.

Keenan said he believes the community is con-

vinced the need for action is real. People in the community believe the facilities issue is affecting the district's educational mission, he said.

"I don't think anyone thinks we're manufacturing this," Kennan said. "I don't think anyone thinks we grossly exaggerating it."

So what's next?

The district will likely need to go to voters for an operating levy around 2012, Keenan said. A decision will have to be made on whether to go to voters for bond levy to construct new buildings or renovate existing ones before or after the operating levy.

Uncertainty over the national economy will make that decision all the trickier, Keenan said.

A 2008 study by Lesko Architecture estimated that a capital plan to provide the district with adequate classroom space would cost between \$74 and \$126 million. The same study said the district would need \$66.3 million just to bring the buildings up to standards, without adding any classroom space.

Keenan said the master plan ultimately decided upon must include a way to address continuing maintenance costs as well. A small permanent improvement levy could be included with any bond issue put before voters to provide ongoing money for the upkeep of district facilities, Keenan said.

"We recognize that the issue is large," Keenan said. "And we recognize that it's probably going to get bigger. We have to decide how to approach it."