

Committee calls for new school buildings

By Kevin Kelley

~~Westlake~~

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The 24-member committee that studied the school district's aging facilities submitted two options under which a new high school and new elementary schools would be constructed.

The 20/20 Vision committee submitted its recommendations to the Board of Education at its Monday meeting.

Option A is a single-phase project

that would build a new high school and renovate and add on to the middle school. This plan would see the construction of two new elementary schools — one housing preschool through first grade and the other grades two and three.

Option B is also a single-phase project that would include a new high school and renovate and add on to the middle school. Three new elementary schools would be built under this plan; two would house kindergarten through

grade three with the third housing preschool through grade three.

Both plans move the fourth graders to the intermediate school and call for a new high school and a renovated middle school with additions. The difference between the plans is in the elementary grade configuration.

The options did not address in detail where each school building would be located, or whether the 40

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acres of land the district owns on Bradley Road would be utilized. However, Keenan said a new high school would be built at the current site around the 2005 Performing Arts Center.

Those two options were arrived at

after examining 13 possible scenarios described in previous studies on the districts' facilities.

Committee member Bill Baddour said the group considered a third plan that would have split the building project into two phases. However, the group ultimately decided that tackling everything at

once would be more cost effective.

The committee also concluded that the problem of aging facilities and overcrowding was so critical that a solution could not wait until the economy improves.

"Despite a challenging economy, the Committee felt strongly that the district must put this issue on the ballot as soon as practicable and before the next operating issue," the 20/20 Vision report stated. "The Committee strongly feels that the issue must be addressed as a whole."

Superintendent Dan Kennan, who also served on the 20/20 Vision committee, said the district is currently throwing money down a hole by trying to maintain outdated buildings. He added that it is critical that the district move forward on the facilities issue.

"This community expects excellence," Kennan said. "It supports excellence."

School Board President Andrea Rocco acknowledged the difficulty in asking voters to pay for new schools during a recession.

"It's not the best time to ask somebody to raise their taxes," she said. However, she said she did not believe that it was an insurmountable hurdle if Westlake resi-

dents had a proper understanding of the problem.

The recommendations did not include any dollar figures for the two options. However, the price tag of previous options described by Lesko Architecture ranged from \$80 to \$125 million.

In leading the discussion among board members, Rocco said that the November general election would be the best time to go before voters with a capital bond issue to fund new school construction.

The committee rejected proposals that focused largely on renovation, concluding they would not be an efficient use of money.

"The buildings have been maintained as well as they possibly can be," Baddour said. "What we're dealing with is 'end of life.'"

The district's seven school buildings range in age from 39 to 60 years, not counting more recent additions, Baddour said.

Renovating the existing schools would not address the overcrowding issue, Baddour added. The district currently educates 400 more students than its buildings were designed to handle, he said.