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News

New schools issue likely in May

By Kevin Kelley
Westlake
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Look for an issue to fund the construction of new schools on the May primary ballot.

Board of Education members have reached a consensus that the problem of its aging and overcrowded schools must be dealt with soon.

Unless a significant reason can be found not to go before voters in May, the board will, according to Superintendent Dan Keenan and Board President Andrea Rocco.

"It's a bigger problem if we wait because the costs compound exponentially," Keenan told West Life.

The district plans to create a building advisory committee of 60 to 75 people, which Keenan envisions comprising the 20/20 Vision Committee that called for new schools along with a dozen or so district staff and faculty members. This new committee will meet through the fall, Keenan said.

In January, the 20/20 Vision committee recommended that the district construct a new high school, new intermediate school and two or three new elementary schools.

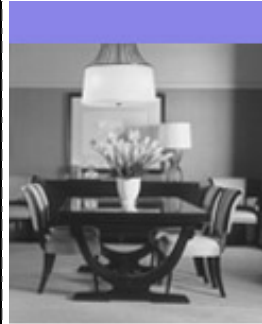
Still to be determined is the grade school configuration. The Vision 20-20 Committee presented two options. One plan had one new school housing preschool through first grade and another grades two and three. The second option would build three new elementary schools – two would house kindergarten through grade three with the third housing preschool through grade three.

A complete plan, including the grade school configuration, should be in place by mid-December, Keenan said.

Also to be determined is whether the district will build the new schools all at once or in phases. While the 20/20 Vision Committee called for a single-phase project, the school board decided to pursue a two-phase route when pursuing interest-free bonds that were part of a federal stimulus package. However, the amount of bonds awarded to the district was not what had been hoped for, and the district declined the bonds. Acceptance of the bonds would have required voters to approve funding of new schools in the November elections.

Whether the district will pursue a one or two-phase plan may depend on the results of a phone survey of Westlake voters to be conducted this month. The survey will gauge the awareness and support for new school buildings, Keenan said. A second, larger phone survey is planned for mid-January, he added.

Some school board members believe the district should pursue a single-phase plan



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because that will cost less in the long run. However, others are concerned about the political feasibility of voters passing a large funding program that could cost more than \$100 million.

The final decision will be made by the school board, which must submit its paperwork for a May vote to the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections by early February.

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