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## Bristol Virginia Council rejects new school proposal

David McGee | Bristol Herald Courier Nov 19, 2018 Updated 7 hrs ago

BRISTOL, Va. — The Bristol Virginia City Council on Monday rejected a School Board request to enter an agreement for a new \$37.6 million elementary school, arguing that the timing was ultimately wrong for its cash-strapped city.

The council voted 3-2 to deny a School Board request to seek financing to establish a consolidated elementary school through a unique public-private partnership with local contractor J.A. Street. School officials have pursued this specific avenue for nearly a year and delivered a proposal they said wouldn't cost the city any additional funds.

Mayor Kevin Mumpower, Vice Mayor Kevin Wingard and newly appointed Councilman Anthony Farnum voted against the plan, while Councilmen Bill Hartley and Neal Osborne voted in favor. A few members of the audience applauded after the vote, which followed a nearly two-hour joint meeting with the School Board.

The board wanted permission to seek financing and construct an 86,500-square-foot building on land adjacent to existing Van Pelt Elementary. It planned to pay for it primarily through savings generated by closing three older elementary schools — Highland View, Stonewall Jackson and Washington-Lee — each of which has multiple issues.

Mumpower, who has publicly questioned many aspects of the project throughout the year, cast the deciding vote.

“The timing of this project and the magnitude of this project is as important as anything,” Mumpower said after the meeting. “We all agree we need a new school, but the timing has got to be right. We still have the responsibility to make sure this city can walk forward financially. To take on something of this magnitude — even though it’s so-called ‘budget neutral’ — there are going to be hidden costs.”

The mayor cited two examples of unbudgeted costs that arose Monday, including an estimated \$188,000 to improve two streets to accommodate additional school traffic and \$145,000 to demolish Highland View Elementary.

“When you have a project of this magnitude, and you’re having to try so hard to figure out how to do it on a very thin margin — with no room for error at all — it really just speaks to [the fact that] you shouldn’t be going forward and doing this,” Mumpower said. “You’re asking for trouble because you can never predict all the things that will happen as the project goes forward.”

Under the negotiated agreement, J.A. Street would have designed the building, gotten financing for the construction, built the building and then leased it to the school system for 30 years. The city would have owned the building once the lease was paid off.

School Board Chairman Randy Alvis voiced the board’s disappointment.

"I think they should have let us at least see what the interest rate would be. That's what we were asking for," Alvis said. "We put a lot of time and energy into this, and we found a way to meet every request the council made. We'll back up and regroup and figure out a solution from here."

Part of that solution will involve finding the funds to repair the three targeted schools — Highland View, Stonewall Jackson and Washington-Lee, which were built in 1938, 1948 and 1968, respectively — and collectively suffer from asbestos, accessibility and other issues, Superintendent Keith Perrigan said.

"Beginning next week, we'll be getting estimates for asbestos abatement, replacing intercom systems [and] elevators, putting in new elevators at our non-handicapped-accessible schools, and we'll be coming to City Council for appropriations with that," Perrigan said. "It's evident they don't want us to move in the direction of a new school, so we've got to make sure the schools we're sending our kids to are accessible, safe and healthy."

The rejected proposal was for an \$18.5 million building that would cost \$37.6 million over the term of the 30-year lease agreement. On Monday the mayor reiterated one of his goals is to establish restricted funds for specific areas, including school construction.

“We want to do a project like that right so you don’t have to finance the entire project because you’re on a thin margin, that you’ve got the cash to put down a significant down payment — say 20 or 30 percent down — so you minimize your risk,” Mumpower said. “I think the City Council is committed to that. We’ve got to keep working the top-line revenue and keep getting businesses in here and growing the economy.”

In opposing the plan, Vice Mayor Wingard cited the city’s unsteady financial footing while Farnum said he was concerned that any problems with the project could ultimately cause financial issues that could lead to teacher layoffs — an assertion rejected by school officials.

In voicing his support, Councilman Neal Osborne said he wanted all children in the city to have the same opportunity to receive a 21st century education — something he didn’t see as possible with the current buildings.

“There are a lot of problems, but this is one problem I think we could actually solve,” Hartley said prior to voting for the plan. “So if we do get into a good financial position, and we see a windfall, we won’t be worrying about a school, and we can deal with some of these other issues.”

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