Leaders discuss a new middle school

BY DEBBIE HIGHTOWER

TRINITY — “The emergency is 20 years old. The time is now.”

These were the words of Randolph County Schools Superintendent Dr. Stephen Gainey at a Business After Hours event sponsored by Archdale-Trinity Chamber of Commerce held in the media center of Archdale-Trinity Middle School.

Executive Director of Randolph County Partnership for Children, Lisa Hayworth, who heads up the Chamber’s education committee, welcomed parents, teachers and community members to the Jan. 24 meeting which highlighted needs at two area middle schools.

“Our Chamber education and economic committee decided several months ago to hold this Business After Hours with a very specific agenda so we can see for ourselves what the condition of the school is and what the future may hold,” she said.

Gainey’s presentation gave a thorough explanation of why a new middle school is needed in the Archdale-Trinity zone, where it would be located, what it will cost and what it will look like.

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Randolph County Superintendent Dr. Stephen Gainey showed the possible location of a new middle school in the Archdale-Trinity zone at an Archdale-Trinity Chamber of Commerce Business After Hours session held at Archdale-Trinity Middle School.

Photo by Debbie Hightower
A spreadsheet including details of each of the 31 schools in the Randolph County Schools district revealed that three of the five schools that are over 100 percent capacity are in the Archdale-Trinity zone.

With a capacity of 382 students, Archdale Elementary has 390 students enrolled.

Listed at 101 percent, Archdale-Trinity Middle School, which is outfitted for 765 students has 772 seventh- and eighth-graders on its rolls. Braxton Craven Middle School, a sixth-grade-only school, has 393 students who attend classes on a campus designed to accommodate 412. Each of the middle schools operate with six trailers on campus.

"What most people don't know is that there are enough students between the two of them to make two grade six to eight middle schools of 564 students each," said Gainey.

In July 1996 Randolph County School Board decided to invest $400,000 to refit the current Braxton Craven facility as a sixth-grade-only school — a temporary solution to relieve overcrowding at ATMS.

Gainey's presentation pointed out that the use of Braxton Craven as a solution will lose its economic effectiveness in the near future.

Among other repairs in the facility constructed in 1951, needs at Braxton Craven in the next few years include window replacement and a new HVAC system, with an unofficial price tag of $10 to $15 million.

"It may not even be a bargain or a long-term solution once all this other stuff pops up," said Gainey. "We don't need to spend that money if it's not a long-term solution."

Most likely location of the new middle school is on a parcel of land just under 70 acres on Sarette Drive behind Trinity High School, which was donated in April 1990 by William and Elizabeth Aldridge.

As far as the appearance of the new middle school, school officials are leaning toward the Uwharrie Middle School model, which would provide space for 550 students with room to grow.

Gainey pointed out that funding for the new school would not come from state or federal sources, but likely Randolph County commissioners.

Vice Chair of Randolph County Board of Commissioners Darrell Frye was on hand to speak to the possibility of footing the $16 million price tag to construct and furnish the new school.

"Right now the state has used the lottery funds to balance our own budget," said Frye. We get a portion of the lottery funds and right now that's going to pay off Providence and Wheatmore. We have a debt capacity of $100 million and we have been retiring debt at the rate of $12 million per year for the past few years, so it's a possibility."

Frye pointed out that Guilford County spent $75 million to replace Eastern Guilford when it burned, not including athletic facilities.

"We built Wheatmore and Providence Grove for about $70 million. That included all facilities," Frye said. "Times have changed and if you can get it built out the door for $20 million that's the way to do it."

Frye discussed two options for funding. The first is a general obligation bond — which would require a community vote. The second option is COPS (Certificates of Participation), in which the project itself serves as collateral for the loan.

At this early stage in planning, school officials were unable to offer a proposed timeline for the new school's construction.

Hargrove explained the Chamber's belief that the existence of adequate schools in the Archdale-Trinity area has both educational and economic impact as schools are one of the primary features investigated by newcomers prior to locating to an area.

In addition to making good economic sense, Gainey drew on his past experience as a middle and high school principal to describe the importance of clear feeder patterns. Rather than having students form relationships at ATMS, only to be divided up later on, the new middle school would offer peers the opportunity to stay together throughout their educational careers.

"The kids and parents of the Archdale-Trinity community need and deserve this new school," said Gainey. "We're building this for somebody's grandchildren."

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