

Star-Telegram

Westlake Academy trustees consider doubling enrollment

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WESTLAKE -- Doubling enrollment, building new high school and middle school buildings, and adding a media center, cafetorium and a primary school might soon be under way at Westlake Academy.

In a workshop session before a meeting Monday night, trustees discussed options for the charter school's future, indicating their preference for spending \$15 million for construction projects that could take 28 months and be funded by the increased enrollment.

The academy's current financial forecast predicts that the fund balance will be exhausted within two fiscal years unless revenue increases or operating costs are reduced.

Increasing enrollment would increase revenues, but staffers say the campus is too crowded to maintain the level of service desired for an International Baccalaureate program.

"With everything we did, we looked at the project with the end in mind -- keeping our vision, values and mission," said Rod Harding, primary principal.

Talks about the expansion have been in the works for months. Using a grant from the Hudson Foundation, the staff hired Project Management Services, a facility planning firm led by Peter Hayes.

At a March workshop, Hayes presented his report to the board. It identified needs for campus facilities costing \$13 million to \$15 million.

Board members have explored 11 options, ranging from maintaining the status quo to spending \$15 million and doubling in size.

The academy has 621 students, with 900 on a waiting list. The option that trustees are leaning toward would raise enrollment to 1,270.

At a retreat in May, the staff explored phasing in new facilities instead of building all at once, as recommended in Hayes' report.

There have been further discussions during a June budget workshop, at the September workshop and at numerous planning sessions.

Mayor Laura Wheat said doubling the school's size would be intimidating. She also wondered about the assumption that enrollment will increase after construction.

"Do we really know 'if we build it, they will come'?" Wheat asked. "If they don't come, we don't have the revenue."

Clint Calzini, secondary principal, said marketing the school and its new facilities would help increase enrollment.

"Sure, it's a big move," Calzini said. "But is it doable? Absolutely, with the right things in place."

Board members also discussed a backup plan if enrollment doesn't increase.

"The ultimate Plan B is backed by property tax, and that's what is giving a lot of heartburn," board member Clifton Cox said. "But I don't think that has a huge likelihood of happening. I think we will grow."

Wheat said next steps include exploring scenarios, including helping taxpayers understand what will happen if enrollment does not increase.

Further discussion is scheduled for the January meeting.

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