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Group airs concerns on high-school balance

BY CLARK CAHILL | MARCH 24, 2009 7:30 AM

Some Iowa City residents are concerned that the district's high-school enrollment — an issue the Iowa City School Board has discussed for years — is polarizing the city.

Members of the Citizens for Outstanding Public Education in Iowa are pushing for a solution that would make the community more balanced.

For the 2009-10 school year West High's enrollment is projected to be above its 1,800-student capacity, and City High's enrollment is projected at 1,414 — well below its 1,600-student capacity.

"What happens every year at this time is they count up the projections and conclude City High will have no growth and West High will have gained," group member Ed Stone said. "The result is another teacher is lost from City High."

The difference in enrollment creates a disadvantage for students at City High because they have fewer opportunities to take the classes they want, Stone said. His concern is not with the type of classes offered at each school but the number of times each class is offered during the school day.

"What is happening at City High is students have to make a choice between two separate classes because they are offered at the same time," he said. "At West High, students do not have that issue."

One option the district discussed — building an addition to West High — could create a long-term divide in the community, Stone said. And the option of constructing a third high school is not realistic due to the district's financial constraints, Superintendent Lane Plugge said.

He is assembling a committee of community members to weigh in on the enrollment issue, he said.

The citizen-group members worry that if West High's enrollment continues to grow, it could affect the decisions of families who move to the area.

"If someone is deciding between two similar homes, but one of them is in an area where people are telling them their kids will have more opportunities, they are going to pick that one," Stone said.

But School Board President Toni Cilek said she believes there are satisfactory opportunities at both schools.

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“When we talk about what to do with the high schools, the discussion will be focused on capacity and enrollment,” she said. “I feel confident that there are excellent opportunities at both schools.”

The citizen-group members are pushing for the district to change enrollment boundaries so there is a reasonable balance at each school, both demographically and in size, Stone said.

Plugge said no specific boundary changes have been discussed, but he noted it will be a factor the committee will consider.

“I think if a boundary change is implemented, our board will also look at socioeconomic balance,” he said.

West High provides free or reduced-price lunches to 17 percent of its students; City High provides the support to 27 percent of its students, according to the citizen-group website.

While the members understand pushing for boundary changes is an emotional issue for some, Stone stressed they are not trying to take resources away from anyone.

“Some people are casting this as a group who wants to do this for their own children, but that is not the issue at all,” he said. “This is about the polarizing of the community and making sure equal public resources are available for everyone.”

The Iowa City School District will hold a public forum on high school enrollment at Parkview Church, 15 Foster Road, on March 30 at 7 p.m.

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