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LOCAL

'I don't know how we do everything': Akron Public Schools board debates facilities options

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Key Points

Akron Public Schools board is considering options for a long-term facilities plan.

Board members call new or renovated buildings for Kenmore and North High priorities.

The public can comment at a special board meeting Monday.

As the Akron Public Schools board debates options for a long-term facilities plan, board members said this week any plan that does not include a new or renovated building in the Kenmore neighborhood would be a non-starter.

A new building for North High School is also a top priority, they said. A commitment to do both eliminates two of the four options that the board reviewed Monday and during a retreat Saturday.

It also leaves the most expensive options on the table.

The board will discuss the options again in a special meeting Monday. There will be time allotted for public comment.

"We are interested in what you think as well," board member Job Esau Perry said to those watching Monday's meeting.

But board members expressed a commitment to Kenmore, a neighborhood that has seen half its schools closed, including its high school, over the last decade.

They were closed due to declining enrollment and the need to consolidate, but Board President Derrick Hall noted more than 1,000 students who are zoned for Kenmore schools

are enrolled elsewhere.

Hall likened Kenmore to an "educational desert" and said putting one of the "crown jewels" of Akron schools would be key to bringing more of those students back.

"Any scenario that further reduces the footprint in Kenmore is untenable for me personally, for a lot of reasons," Hall said.

Akron Public Schools building plan options aim to address several issues

The four options presented aim to tackle several issues in the district. Aside from needs in Kenmore and the crumbling North High School, the district has overcrowding in the North cluster of schools due in large part to immigrant families located there. But the district has 4,000 seats open at the elementary level citywide — enough open seats, in theory, to close up to a dozen elementary schools, Chief Operations Officer Stephen Thompson told the board.

Two specialty schools, the Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts and the National Inventors Hall of Fame STEM High School, need new homes. The district has about 10 buildings that would need renovation or replacement to stay open, including Firestone Park and Pfeiffer elementary schools.

The board reviewed four plans — labeled Option I, I-B, II and III — that have different combinations of new buildings, school closures and redistricting moves to check as many needs off the list as possible. The board could also choose to take parts of different options and combine them, or pick one option as a full slate but change the proposed timeline or funding sources.

Options I and I-B are the only two that include new buildings for North High and Kenmore. The proposed Kenmore facility would be a new K-8 school that would house Pfeiffer students along with possibly one or two specialty middle schools, like Miller South.

The cost of Akron Public Schools building plan options

The cost of Option I tops \$140 million, with the district taking on about \$100 million in debt. The subset of that plan, Option I-B, includes the same projects but puts off the new build for North several years, allowing the district to pass a bond issue to raise the money that would pay for the debt.

Board member N.J. Akbar said on one hand, the district has no debt currently.

"That is virtually unheard of for an urban school district to have no debt," Akbar said. "We are in a good position in that way."

On the other hand, he said, "the mortgage of \$100 million, that literally gives me nightmares to think about," particularly the impact it would have on the community and possibly raising housing costs to support a bond issue that would likely be in addition to an operating levy.

"Unfortunately, unless there's some other way, I don't know how we do everything," he said.

Akbar said he also agrees doing nothing for North and Kenmore are non-negotiable and hoped to look at possibly adjusting the timeline to be able to do both.

"Are there pieces of I or I-B that we could look at coming up with a plan that may take us a little longer but gets us a better result to meet those non-negotiables?" he asked.

Each of the four options includes closing Pfeiffer and Firestone Park, along with the Ott administration building, which houses the office of some specialty programs in the district. Depending on the option approved, that could happen in June of 2024 or 2025.

All four options also include moving all the sixth grade students in the East cluster to East Community Learning Center, making East a 6-12 building instead of 7-12. That could happen as early as next year and could be a recommendation made independent of whatever else the board decides to do.

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