

News

EDUCATION / SCHOOL BOARD

New school plans for purchased property south of Ellis

By Heather Rule
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The new intermediate school is in the thick of the planning and design stages right now.

"Everything is an idea and a concept," said Mark Stotts, finance and operations director for Austin Public Schools. "Right now, we're just really continuing the planning stages."

The plan is for the STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) school for fifth- and sixth-graders to house 884 students in a 112,250-square-foot building just east of Ellis Middle School.

A purchase agreement was approved by the school board in September for 13.2 acres south of

Sixth Avenue Southeast and east of 15th Street Southeast. This site is just south of Ellis, and the property was owned by First United Methodist Church.

An old church building still remains on the property, which the district closed on recently. The district received a check from the Hormel Foundation Board for \$110,000, the total amount for the property purchase.

But if the new school building will be east of Ellis, where athletic fields are now, what will become of this



Stotts

property to the south?

"Our intent is we want to locate athletic fields where the church currently sits," Stotts said. "We have to move the athletic fields to the south."

There isn't enough room to have the new school building on the property to the south, and the athletic fields already at Ellis will need to be replaced. The fields that have been discussed for the site include two baseball fields, two softball fields and then football and soccer fields that overlay those.

Five tennis courts currently at Ellis will need to be removed to make room for the new school. Stotts said his feeling is that those need to get replaced, not necessarily for physical education purposes, but

because of the space needed for both varsity and junior varsity events.

Figuring out the solution to the tennis court replacement is still very much in the idea stage.

"Our first order of business is to get this building designed," Stotts said.

About eight acres of the property south of Ellis is wetlands (to the west) and about five acres is not. Along with athletic fields, there are other possibilities for the rest of the property that are in the design phase, including a physical education fitness trail and science outdoor learning environment, which can be done without disturbing the wetlands, Stotts said.

"We're going to try and use and

maintain the property," Stotts said.

The church building will be torn down when construction begins on the site, which might be in May or June. In the meantime, a traffic study will be done by an engineering firm that will take traffic counts and make sure the roads are large enough to handle the traffic. That will happen within the next month or two, Stotts said.

The district will meet with property owners in the area of Ellis and the new school site at 5:30 p.m. Thursday in the district office conference room, room 164 at Austin High School.

"We want to be good neighbors," Stotts said. "We really do."

Though it's early, results positive for Sumner

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Sumner Elementary School principal Sheila Berger said she promised the Austin School Board an update on the modified, 45/15 calendar.

Results and feedback so far have pointed to the positive end of the spectrum, but Berger also highlighted another word in her presentation to the board at its Monday meeting: Caution.

"You don't want to make a snap judgment," Berger said. "This is early. We will definitely want to look at things over time and look at trends."

Sumner reached its halfway mark on the 45 days on, 15 days off calendar in December. The school just finished mid-year assessments, and results look positive, Berger said, though state assessment data will not be available

until at least July.

Scantron assessment scores are on the upswing. The fall assessments for both reading and math show a higher average starting score than scores of the past two years. The mid-year scores show similar increases to previous years (starting from a higher average).

Individual grade levels are notching some highlights, too. Eighty-three percent of first-graders qualified for phonics instruction in August, but after 12 weeks, only 7 percent required further phonics instruction. One of four students moved up four or more benchmark levels on the reading assessment.

For students in grades three, four and five, from August to December on the math Scantron, the number of students meeting or exceeding grade-level expectations more than doubled.

One other factor to note is that the loss of knowledge over the summer decreased. The review time in the start of the school year, which usually takes three to four weeks, took about two instead.

"Shortening that summer break caused our children to do better," Berger said.

Among the feedback Berger has heard included families enjoying the opportunity to recharge students during break, parents found remediation during the school year to be more beneficial than waiting for summer school and students seem to look forward to going back to school after the intercessions.

School board member Angie Goetz has two boys that attend Sumner.

"It has been a very, very positive experience for us," Goetz said. "They love it."

The staff is also well-rested following the breaks, Berger

said, which has also resulted in increased morale.

Sumner students return from their second intercession Tuesday. School officials didn't notice any kind of lag after the first intercession in the fall, Berger said. The school will have another two weeks of intercession at the end of March.

With registration for the next school year at Sumner coming up later this month, families in the district with students in grades 1-4 will receive a reminder letter to let them know that Sumner is an option for them, said John Alberts, educational services director for the district.

The school also has conferences coming up, and at that time it will survey parents to see what is and is not working with the modified calendar.

"I'm hearing good things from most families," Berger said.

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