

County in bind on school building costs

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The county is slipping into a financial straitjacket: School construction and renovation costs are rising as the revenues to cover them are static or falling, county officials said.

At yesterday's quarterly meeting of the County Council and the school board, suggestions on new sources of revenue were not forthcoming. But any discussion of tax increases was put off, with officials instead sticking to a broad discussion of the issue during the gathering at board headquarters.

"I'm interested in having a robust discussion about public policy," council Chairman Courtney Watson, an Ellicott City Democrat, said after the meeting.

Ken Roey, the school system's executive director of facilities and management, displayed a chart showing that state school construction funding has produced 22.3 percent of the county's money for building and renovating schools over the past four years, and it is likely to drop next year. Meanwhile new county funding from a limited excise tax on new homes is about to disappear, meaning a loss of 14 percent of money now available.

Construction costs have escalated from \$150 a square foot in fiscal 2005 to \$240 a square foot now, Roey said. And with oil prices skyrocketing, costs are expected to go higher.

"We simply can't do everything we want to do by maintaining an \$80 million [annual] capital budget into the future," he said, referring to the current level of spending on school projects.

When asked by council member Calvin Ball about a way out of the jam, Roey said, "I don't have a solution. It comes down to taxes."

To that point Watson replied, "The reality is, the school board can't raise taxes."

School Superintendent Sydney L. Cousin said he hasn't raised the issue lately with elected officials because of the state's fiscal problems and the faltering economy.

"We didn't feel it was timely to go ask for raising revenue," he told the group. "[Still] the need is increasing. The costs are increasing. The only thing I know is that we can't go on the way we have been, deferring schools."

Watson said the county's delegation to the state legislature needs to be part of the discussion, while Councilwoman Mary Kay Sigaty noted that schools aren't the only county facilities that need improvement.

"At some point, we have to work on how this all fits together," she said.

The debate recalls one that occurred five years ago, when then-County Executive James N. Robey proposed raising the real estate transfer tax to produce the needed money. That idea was defeated by the county's Statehouse delegation, which eventually agreed to a lesser tax - an excise levy on new homes that has raised much less revenue.

Watson has been a longtime foe of crowded schools, recounting at yesterday's meeting that she and school board Chairman Frank Aquino "got into this crazy life" as public officials by pushing for new schools in the northeastern county more than a decade ago.

That advocacy helped win approval for the construction of Bellows Spring Elementary, which, she noted, is facing overcrowding unless redistricting occurs by August 2010 as planned, or perhaps earlier. She also is worried about development in Elkrige producing a new round of crowding while school officials have no sites for new buildings along the redeveloping U.S. 1 corridor.

School officials said that new enrollment projections show crowding by 2012 in five eastern county elementary schools, which would delay development in those school districts under the county's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance. They are Bellows Spring, Guilford, Laurel Woods, Phelps Luck and Thunder Hill. Crowding is also projected at Murray Hill Middle, and at Howard and Reservoir high schools, though high schools are not regulated under the APFO growth controls.

All the elementary and middle schools facing crowding are in the eastern county, while several western county schools are now expected to be far under capacity because of the slowing of home sales.

"Somehow, we've got to use that capacity," Watson said.