

Dinwiddie residents oppose closing school

Speakers tell board to consider building's history

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DINWIDDIE — More than 100 people turned out this week for a public hearing about the possibility of closing the current middle school, which opened in 1954 as the county's black high school prior to integration in 1969.

The School Board is considering consolidating Dinwiddie's three secondary schools into a middle and high school to find long-term structural solutions to steadily decreasing state and federal funding and increasing costs, which have left them with a \$4.2 million deficit for the upcoming fiscal year.

The 17 county residents who spoke during Tuesday's hearing at Dinwiddie High School told the board that they would be taking steps backward to save money, neglecting heritage and abandoning a system that parents said was working well for their children.

"If the consideration of closing the school is because of the possibility of saving money, we ask: How do you determine how much one's heritage is worth?" asked former School Board member Legert Hamilton, before turning over a petition against the proposal signed by 874 alumni and friends of the former Southside High School.

The move would save \$825,000 through reduced utility and transportation costs and the elimination of some staff positions, according to Dinwiddie Superintendent David Clark. He detailed the division's financial strain before opening the hearing, pointing out that restructuring schools to conventional sixth- through eighth-grade and ninth-through 12th-grade systems would fill only one-fifth of the hole in the fiscal 2013 budget.

The board's draft budget for next year also slashes \$2.2 million in staff and programming and depends on receiving \$970,000 of additional funding from the county's Board of Supervisors to achieve solvency. They hope to lessen the overall reduction in force by offering retirement incentives, he said. Yvonne Stewart, a member of Southside's Class of 1965, asked board members not to shutter a reminder of the civil rights movement, an era that left her with physical and emotional scars. Stewart described the tension that went through the community after the school mysteriously burned down twice before its completion.

"I remember as a little girl, no one wanted those black children to have that school," Stewart said. She also remembered being cherry-bombed on the side of the road as she and her brother walked to the store. "I have the scar on my right leg that I will take to my grave," she said.

School Board member Barbara Pittman, who served as principal of Dinwiddie Middle School, said that although she was grateful to hear from speakers who were concerned about the building's historical significance, she did not want the board to lose sight of the mission to give students the best education possible.

The board is considering moving grades six through eight to the current Junior High School building because it has a capacity to hold 1,300 students, whereas Dinwiddie Middle can house 1,100.

The county separated students between Dinwiddie Middle and Junior High schools for the first time in 2008 when the new high school opened. At the time that the grades were split up, the county was anticipating an influx of students because of expansion at Fort Lee. The wave of new faces never came. Enrollment at Dinwiddie Middle is expected to drop to 648 students by 2015.