

Crowd of 500 attends Wilson meeting on West Side school boundaries

By KC Cowan
The Southwest Portland Post

The wet, miserable weather didn't appear to discourage anyone from attending the West Side Boundaries Community Meeting at Wilson High School the evening of Jan. 19.

With an estimated attendance of almost 500, dozens had to stand as residents packed into every available seat in Wilson's cafeteria.

Also in attendance were several Portland Public Schools board members, and superintendent Carole Smith. Smith will make her final recommendations to the PPS board by the end of January.

The meeting was an opportunity to give feedback on the latest proposal by the District-wide Boundary Review Advisory Committee.

It's been a year-long process to create what the school district calls "right sized schools," to address overcrowding at Chapman and Hayhurst elementary schools and Lincoln High School.

A video played at the start of the meeting warned another 5,000 students will come into the Portland school district within the next decade.

Making a school "right sized" means ensuring enrollment at each school is high enough to pay for a complete range of core curriculum classes as well as plenty of elective classes, while not overloading classrooms with too many students.

Schools with lower attendance risk missing out on the extra electives because there isn't the money to pay for them.

Chapman, for instance, is already overcrowded and expected to become more so. The current recommendations call for redrawing boundaries to send some of the Chapman students to Ainsworth elementary.

Hayhurst elementary is currently overcrowded. But if the Odyssey K-8 program, now housed in Hayhurst, moves to another school, such as East Sylvan, Jackson Middle School or the currently vacant Smith School, Hayhurst would then risk becoming under enrolled.

So students from Bridlemile and Rieke would be shifted to Hayhurst.

Hillsdale Business and Professional Association president Mike Roach spoke against changes for Rieke School.

"This boundary change would push customers away from Hillsdale," said Roach. "And traffic—oh, my goodness. The proposed boundary change would produce 'Carmageddon.'"

According to Roach, "Every morning, Monday through Friday, frustrated parents driving from the north would flood every side street in Hillsdale, trying to avoid the already choked Sunset Boulevard and Capitol Highway intersection, making Hillsdale streets unsafe for walking by students or customers, who in turn, would have to drive, creating still more traffic chaos."

To relieve overcrowding at Lincoln High School, the boundary committee recommends moving the Spanish Immersion program from Ainsworth to East Sylvan. And instead of Ainsworth students going to West Sylvan Middle and Lincoln High, they would now go to Robert Gray Middle and Wilson High.

Jordan Hornlick, a seventh grader at West Sylvan Middle School was looking forward to being with his longtime friends at Lincoln High School. But the border change will force him to attend Wilson.

"I immediately grew really sad and angry at the prospect of losing the friends I made and being forced to start over again," he testified.

His friend, Evan Nyhus, who studies Chinese at West Sylvan asked, "What will happen to my Mandarin studies at Wilson, where Mandarin is not offered?"

While most parents would agree overcrowded and under-enrolled schools are a problem, they also dislike changes for their own children.

Despite assurances that the school board will likely keep students where they are by making boundary changes effective for incoming students only, and "grandfathering" current students to keep them where there are, there no guarantees.

This prompted more than one parent to beg the boundary committee to maintain status quo for those students in affected schools.

"We couldn't agree with you more—changes need to be made to address overcrowding at PPS schools," said Karen Silva Manning.

"Opening Smith is a consideration that makes sense. But uprooting established students in the midst of their education does not make sense. Please keep current students where they are and do not make an exception to the grandfather clause."

More than one parent brought up the vacant Smith School as a solution. Stephanie Condor, who has children at Maplewood, said their school is very small, overcrowded and projected to become even more so by 2020.

"So what we'd like to support is the idea



Judy Brennan, enrollment director of the Portland school district, goes over some numbers for the crowd at Wilson. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

of the Smith Elementary School being reopened in 2017. We see this as



Hillsdale Business and Professional Association president Mike Roach testified against changes affecting Rieke Elementary School. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

alleviating not only the overcrowding at Maplewood, but also at Capitol Hill. So we see that as a very viable solution," she said to cheers from the audience.

Despite the negative feelings about many of the proposed changes, the meeting's tone was polite and respectful. Many thanked the members of the boundary committee for a "thankless job." And Hayhurst parent Tina Oliver said if Odyssey moves out, they are ready to welcome new families.

"Hayhurst is a warm, generous, and welcoming community," she said. "We have great empathy for communities that are going through anxiety and stress of having to leave their beloved school. Change is difficult and we recognize this."

"We want you to know we will work hard to help families that are shifted to Hayhurst adjust and thrive. If your family might come to Hayhurst, we invite you to get to know us a bit, and we want you to know that we welcome you."



Ainsworth parents came out in force and wore matching t-shirts as a sign of unity. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

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