

Bend La-Pine School Student Enrollment Surges

by K_Guice

For the 16th consecutive school year, the Bend-La Pine School district has had a significant enrollment increase in its schools.

“Initial reports show that we will meet or exceed our initial projections,” said Ron Wilkinson, Deputy Superintendent. “We’ve grown by more than 400 students this year” and that number could rise by the end of the week.

Becky Crawford instructs her students at Pine Ridge Elementary School - Photo by Richard Burton While the growth is viewed as being positive by the school district, it can present problems as well. “We do have the logistical constraints of educating the students,” said Julianne Repman, communications manager for the Bend-La Pine School District.

“We currently don’t have enough permanent facilities,” she said. “So, we are bringing in temporary buildings.”

The school has added 20 temporary classrooms in the district. “That is one way we could continue to provide a quality education,” Repman added.

Last year, the school saw an increase of 600 new students in the district and this year they expected and planned for approximately 400.

“We do enrollment projections in the spring based on growth patterns in the current year,” said John Rexford, assistant superintendent of operations for the Bend-LaPine School District.

“Generally our gross numbers overall are accurate,” he added. However, he said often times adjustments have to be made.

Even when the numbers are right on target, as they were this year, the district doesn’t always know exactly which schools will receive more children.

“We were as prepared as we could be,” Rexford said. For example, temporary classrooms were placed at High Lakes, Pine Ridge, Jewell and Buckingham elementary schools. However, there now appears to be a need for additional classrooms at Lava Ridge.

While the temporary modular units are a bandage to the Bend-LaPine student boom, Repman says it does put a strain on the schools.

For example, the temporary classrooms have to come out of the schools operating budget, the same pool that funds teachers and books. “For every four to five of these, that is another teacher we could have in the classroom,” Repman says.

Each unit costs \$15,000-\$20,000 per year to lease, plus an additional \$15,000-\$20,000 to set up.

“That’s \$300,000-\$450,000 alone coming out of our operating budget,” she said. “We then have to take a look at our priorities and then reevaluate the best ways to use our resources for the students.”

It is an issue that the district is constantly and carefully assessing. “We’ve been working closely with our schools to meet staffing needs to ensure that we are continuing to provide a quality education for our community’s children,” Wilkinson adds.

However the issue goes beyond just budget and staffing. The schools, even with temporary classrooms, can only handle so much.

“You have more kids using the bathroom, so you may have lines,” said Repman. “More kids are sharing the common areas and lunchroom, so we are looking forward to permanent solutions.”

Some of those proposed solutions, including new schools, are mapped out in the district’s long-range Sites and Facilities Plan that it does every five years.

“The district started growing in 1989 and quickly realized that it needed to look at growth and planning,” Rexford said. “The long-range sites and facilities report includes 20-year-enrollment projections and it will have five-year recommendations.”

The most recent study was completed in December of 2005. “Those recommendations resulted in the bond issue which will be on the ballot the November,” he said.

The new bond proposed will provide funds to build three new schools over the next four years and allow for additions to other schools to create much-needed capacity.

“This is really a result of a community-based planning process to meet the needs for enrollment and relieve over crowding,” Rexford said.

While taxpayers will foot the bill, they won’t see a rise in their taxes for voting yes to the proposed bond thanks to good timing and coordination on the school district’s part.

“Several older bonds are being paid off, so, this proposed bond can be added without raising the current property tax rate,” he said.

The bond helps meet the needs of enrollment growth and still meets the current tax rate.

“What we are trying to do is make sure that taxpayers know that we are going to manage the school construction so that we are able to minimize any impact on them as taxpayers,” Rexford added.

While growth has happened faster than expected, the district has temporary solutions in place with long-term solutions in the works to meet future needs.

Rexford said, “In the end, it is really about student achievement and making sure that we have a proper space where the kids can learn and grow.”

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