

# Chalkboard

By

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Gentry Public Schools

Consider this your official invitation to join the Gentry School Board on Monday night, January 16, 2006, to discuss future building plans for the district. The board meeting will begin at 7:00 and will be held in the Middle/High School Cafeteria. The meeting is being held there because from 6:00 p.m. to the beginning of the board meeting, the new addition will be open for public viewing. As you may know, the new addition physically connects the high school to the cafeteria thus making sense to move the meeting to the cafeteria.

If you are a regular reader of the *Chalkboard* you know that many times state mandates and local wishes do not always match. But many times they do and this invitation is one of those times. Not only does the school board and school staff desire your input, but also the district is required to solicit it. New state regulations provide that the district “present a draft of the facilities master plan in a public hearing in the same locality as the school district and take public comments.” This is certainly a reasonable mandate as the school belongs to you, the parents and patrons of the district.

You are aware that providing adequate and equitable school facilities in Arkansas has been on center stage now for several years. Most recently, Act 1426 of 2005 § 6-21-806 requires that districts create an ***Academic Facilities Master Plan*** to deal both with new facility construction and maintenance and renovation of existing facilities.

Guidelines from the also new **Division of Public School Academic Facilities and Transportation** offer, and I quote directly, the following information in regard to the state’s school systems.

“The State of Arkansas operates 1,205 schools and 5,766 school-related permanent buildings in 252 school districts. In the 1960s and 1990s, Arkansas, along with many other areas of the country, saw a surge of new school construction; however, some of Arkansas’s first school buildings opened its doors over 80 years ago. Nearly all of Arkansas’s schools were constructed prior to current building codes and standards. Since the opening of the first school to present, there have been new codes and standards published for virtually every building system ranging from air quality and air conditioning to technology and fire and safety.

The accumulation of aging structures and deferred maintenance has created many emergencies during the last decade – failing heating and cooling systems, deteriorating walls, inoperable windows, leaking roofs, etc. Effectively addressing the significant assessment of facilities issues and at the same time building a new generation of forward looking, technologically capable schools will require long range facilities master planning. School districts capital and operating budgets must be focused on a master plan that is complementary and broad-based.

The State of Arkansas conducted a building condition assessment of all district owned buildings. These assessment reports should be used in conjunction with district maintenance information to identify improvement projects. The goal of improvement projects should be to have all district-owned educational facilities to a condition only requiring routine maintenance within the ten-year horizon of this master plan.”

As you might surmise, the task is daunting in scope. The vastest aspect may be the price tag attached to the needed changes. Another overwhelming factor in northwest Arkansas is keeping pace with growth in the area.

In the last decade, the Gentry school district opened the “new” middle school in 1995, added four classrooms to it in 1998, built a new vocational agriculture building in 1999, opened the new cafeteria in 2001, and are putting the finishing touches on the 12-classroom high school addition now. As you well know the new Primary School, located just past and behind the middle school, is beginning to take shape. It cannot be finished too soon as the district leased six portable classroom building for the Primary and Intermediate schools this year.

You may be thinking that with all the new buildings Gentry’s 10-Year Plan should be a snap to formulate. Not so. The new Primary school has 18 regular classrooms. Growth in the district since the planning of that facility could easily require 21 classrooms by the time we move in next fall.

It is this type problem that requires planning. Do we reconfigure the campus grade assignments and leave the second grade at its existing location? Do we go ahead and enlarge the new Primary now while the building phase is on going? If we want the second option, how do we pay for it? When do we build the P.E. gym for the new Primary school? When should we add on to the middle school on the southwest corner where an expansion slot was designed in, in 1993? Where will the funds come to maintain the existing buildings we have as operational and maintenance costs soar?

Perhaps now you better understand the situation. In some manner, you will help assume the cost of your child and the children of the district receiving an adequate and equitable education. Please come next Monday night, January 16, 2006, prepared to offer any thoughts you may have.