


'They're running out of space': Caroline School Board and supervisors weigh options to address growth

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Growth was the primary topic during a joint meeting of the Caroline Board of Supervisors and the county's school board on Monday evening.

A recent report from the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center alarmed supervisors and school board members alike. The report indicated that rural Caroline is the fourth-fastest growing locality in Virginia, behind only Louisa, Goochland and New Kent counties.

Caroline added 2,871 people from 2020-24, a 9.3% population increase. The two bodies were already eyeing plans to combat growth, but the report heightened awareness of the issue.

“You’re talking 9% growth in a matter of three years,” Western Caroline District Supervisor Jeff Black said. “If you live in the Madison District and the Western Caroline District, that’s where the population is booming. We’re going to have to do something. They’re running out of space.”

The school board placed four options on the table — costing between \$64 million and \$93 million — that could help ease space concerns at the county’s five schools.

While the inevitability of raising the real estate tax rate was a major concern among school board members and supervisors, both bodies seemed to agree that standing by idly is not an option.

“I know my peers get tired of me saying this, but that’s a lot of money,” Bowling Green District School Board representative Michael Hubbard said. “So, when I go down Sparta Road and there are folks that are barely making it right now, and you want me to put on a heavy [tax burden], we are not blind to that. We recognize it. But the bottom line is that we still have a mission. We still have to educate our kids. We just have to figure out how we’re going to do that together.”

Since 2020, 1,194 building permits have been issued for single-family homes in the county, a number that doesn’t include families moving into pre-existing dwellings. In 2023-24, there were 4,564 students enrolled in the school division, an increase of 227 from the previous year.

Superintendent Sarah Calveric said she desperately hopes to avoid trailers in the backyards of schools. She urged the supervisors and school board representatives to be proactive in handling space concerns.

“Putting a band-aid on something is going to end up costing us more down the road,” Black said.

Option No. 1 to address growth in the school district involves building a fourth elementary school for 450 pre-K-5 students, adding 3,920 square feet (four classrooms) to Caroline Middle School, adding 6,860 square feet (seven classrooms) to Caroline High School, purchasing and renovating the former Atlantic Union Bank office building in Carmel Church to house the school board office, maintenance building, the Lotus Academy alternative school, the Chesapeake Bay Regional Governors School and community center space. There would also be a new transportation building. The total cost for this option is \$85 million.

Option No. 2 consists of the new elementary school (\$28 million), school board office and maintenance department together in one area, four additional classrooms at CMS, adding 20,580 square feet to CHS so it can host Lotus Academy and the governor’s school, as well as a new transportation building. This option would cost approximately \$93 million.

Option No. 3 includes the purchase of the Atlantic Union Bank and its existing 71,714 square feet of office space to hold the school board office, maintenance building, pre-K center, community center and elementary school growth space. The middle school would get four additional classrooms, and the high school would add the same square footage and programs as in Option 2. There would also be a new transportation building, all at a cost of \$64.7 million.

Option No. 4 includes a small addition to the three existing elementary schools, four new classrooms at CMS, the same addition to CHS as the previous two options, the purchase and renovation of the Atlantic Union Bank building for administration, maintenance and community center space and a new transportation building, totaling \$73.7 million.

Calveric said the division is cognizant of the prospect of abandoned buildings if the boards eventually agree to move forward with purchasing a new school and the Atlantic Union office space.

“That is a conversation for the boards to have. What should we do if we vacate some of these properties?” Calveric said. “Do we gift them back to the county? Do we sell them? ... We want to hear from the community. No one would want vacated buildings to become decrepit and a community eyesore. That is the last thing any of us would want.”

In other business, RRMM Architects, which was hired to evaluate Caroline’s schools and auxiliary buildings last spring, reported Monday that the five schools range from fair to excellent condition, but the auxiliary buildings, which include Lotus Academy, the governor’s school, the maintenance department and school board office, are not in good condition, ranging from fair to poor. The cost to make repairs to get all the buildings up to par, according to RRMM, is \$31.5 million.