



PUBLIC MEETING of the Greenbelt City Council held Tuesday, August 21, 2001, for the purpose of reviewing the status of overcrowding at Eleanor Roosevelt High School for the upcoming academic year.

Mayor Davis started the meeting at 8:05 p.m. It was held in the Council Room of the Municipal Building.

PRESENT WERE: Council members Edward V.J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts, Thomas X. White, and Mayor Judith F. Davis.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael P. McLaughlin, City Manager; Wendy Wexler, Youth & Family Counselor; and Kathleen Gallagher, City Clerk.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Sylvester Conyers, Principal, Allen Elliott, PTSA Representative, and Hillary Kirk, Political Action Committee Chairperson, Eleanor Roosevelt High School; Leta Mach, Jackie Magness, Liz Roslewicz, Brenda Cooley, and Jim Inzeo, Advisory Committee on Education; Carol Mealey, ACE volunteer; Mary Moien, Greenbelt News Review; Amy Boyes, the Gazette; and others.

Following introductions, Mayor Davis explained that the City had requested a work session with representatives of the administration of the county public schools and the school board to discuss the concerns raised by the announcement of the removal of nine temporary buildings from Eleanor Roosevelt High School (ERHS) for relocation to the Belair Complex for Bladensburg High School. Franklin Rishel, Deputy Superintendent of Administration, responded by sending projected enrollment figures and other data for fall 2001, which he said would demonstrate that plans for ERHS are not out of line with those for other schools, thus "negating" the need for a meeting. The Mayor said Council decided to hold a public meeting to give people the opportunity to speak, even if no representatives of the school system were there to respond. She said Council was concerned not only with the loss of the buildings but also with the possible loss of staff, which could affect programs and curricula.

The Mayor asked Mr. Conyers how the situation stood. He responded that there is less correlation between the number of students and the need for space in high school than in elementary school. He was of the opinion that ERHS had been excelling in an overcrowded state and could continue to do so, but that it would be bad if it went further than projected for the this fall. He stressed that overcrowding was not in itself an issue unless the overcrowding affected learning, but he said he did not want people to think ERHS could continue "pulling a rabbit out of the hat" indefinitely. He said ERHS would lose only three teachers. In response to a query from the Mayor, he said the school system would make adjustments at the end of September. It was also clarified that although there were teachers who "floated" without regular classrooms, all classes were held in reasonable classroom spaces. He also said he had no idea how the utilization figures were calculated by the school system and could not address that.

Mayor Davis commented that despite overcrowding, last year was a "stellar year" for ERHS. Mr. Conyers confirmed this, adding that all their measurements on all possible criteria went up last year.

Mr. Putens asked how the projected changes would impact curriculum and quality. Mr. Conyers said little impact was anticipated at this time.

Mr. Putens suggested the group should be thinking now of being prepared for next year. He suggested meeting again in six months or so. Mayor Davis suggested combining the stakeholder meetings for the school board and the former ERHS cluster of schools.

Mr. Elliott noted there is still some possibility that three more temporaries could be taken, after the September 15 school census is taken. He said that in addition to the lack of information on how the system calculates its data, the projection figures seem to change "at will." He said there also appears to be game-playing with student assignments, which sometimes seem to have no basis. Mr. Inzeo asked who was accountable, and Mr. Elliott said that would be the pupil accounting office.

Ms. Cooley raised a question about students who enroll at ERHS using false addresses. Mr. Conyers described the measures the school takes to verify residency. He said there will always be some people who get away with this, but it is not a factor in overcrowding. Once again, however, he said this was not the main concern: "We shouldn't focus on overcrowding if instruction is good. Overcrowding as such is not the issue."

Ms. Mealey asked what the impact would be on class size, and Mr. Conyers allowed that this was a good question. Mr. Roberts brought up the question of other facilities and resources: cafeterias, gym facilities, restrooms, libraries, computer labs, etc.

Mr. Conyers said these facilities are affected by overcrowding. But he added that simply reducing the size of the student body would not be a desirable solution either because then ERHS would lose many of the diverse resources and offerings that are a function of its size. Ms. Kirk said she would nevertheless maintain that ERHS needs more space for a student body of its current size. Mr. Elliott said that the important thing is that there be no more cutting back. A number of audience members commented upon the special qualities that ERHS has because of its size and diversity.

There were a number of questions from the audience expressing frustration with not knowing who is responsible for various school system decisions and how various statistics are compiled. Mr. Conyers was able to address some of these questions but said answers to others would have to come from the administration. A parent in the audience asked "How can we focus our energies? How can we identify the authorities to address?" Mayor Davis recommended getting in touch with Ms. Kirk and Mr. Elliott and working with the PTSA, since these individuals know who the players are. Mr. Conyers also encouraged people to come to the next PTSA meeting on September 12.

Council directed the City Manager to prepare a letter of response to the school system regarding their refusal to meet or to attend the public meeting.

The meeting ended at about 10:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathleen Gallagher

City Clerk