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Schools in Wilson County increase by 400 students per year, said Board of Education Chairman Don Weathers at a work session held Saturday morning. The open-to-the-public session was held at the Harding Drive location of the former Lebanon High School auditorium and explored middle school possibilities to meet the needs of a growing student population.

Weathers told The Wilson Post that Carroll Oakland Elementary, Southside Elementary and Tuckers Crossroads Elementary schools have experienced issues due to overcrowding – in Carroll Oakland, in particular. “Carroll Oakland has the worst problem. They have numerous portable classrooms. They are having classes and instructional time in the hallways,” he said. “While you can teach in those environments, they are not the best to operate in. There is a level of security that you just can’t provide in portable classrooms.”

Per the Board of Education’s request, Jason Morris, an architect with KBJM, presented three options and price estimates that would alleviate the problem at Saturday’s session.

The first presentation was an option to use the newer portions of the former Lebanon High School facility that were built in the 1970s and 1990s – with some renovations since then. Morris, who provided the presentation free of charge, said that estimated cost based on current construction rates ranged from \$2-8 million.

Concerned parents from Southside, Carroll Oakland and TXR asked the board about pests, asbestos removal and the condition of the building. Director of Schools Mike Davis told them that if the board chose to use the facility they would not utilize the older, decrepit sections – “even for storage.”

“I can assure you we wouldn’t put your children anywhere that they would be exposed to that,” Davis said. Choosing to utilize the Harding Drive location would provide for a capacity of 850 students, but Davis said the actual number of students being educated there would be less. “There would be 637 students, taking sixth thru eighth graders from those schools (Southside,

Tuckers and Carroll Oakland).”

Many parents were still not convinced of the facility being in good enough condition to place their children. Weather clarified Tuesday that when information was released regarding the Harding Drive facility four years ago, they might have been “overly aggressive in condemning the old building to justify the new building.”

“During all that period there was a lot of information that the entire building was in great disrepair and that’s just not the case – the portion that we are considering, with the key word here being ‘considering’, using for the middle school is not in terrible shape. It is in great shape,” Weather said. “It is good or better than the buildings that those three elementary schools are currently going to class in.”

Weathers continued by stating that issues with the sanitary sewer and pests have been addressed. “The sewer has been permanently sealed. We have regular treatments for animals and bugs in all our school buildings. You are going to have issues like that in brand new buildings or not,” he said.

The second option presented by Morris was to add-on to the existing schools, which would cost an estimated \$9 million with science labs included “but not technology.” Based on current construction cost it would take \$3.5 to add to Southside Elementary, \$3.4 million to add to Carroll Oakland and almost \$3 million to add a two story facility to TXR.

The final option was to explore building a new 165,000 square foot school on the property where the new Lebanon High School is located – which would cost roughly \$23 million for the building and site work. “That does not include land surveys or reviews by the city of Lebanon,” Morris said.

Wilson County Commissioner William Glover attended the Saturday meeting and remarked that the county commission has experienced shortfalls due to the current economy. “The ink isn’t even dry on Watertown High School. I don’t know how we are going to come up with the money,” he said.

A guest in the crowd asked the board of education why they could not sell the facility on Harding Drive and use the money to build a new school or for additions to the current ones. "There is no buyer in the market," Weathers said.

Following the session, Weathers said he felt it went well. "I think their report was effective and provided the information we asked for," he said, adding that no decision will be made until the Board gets "all of the information we need."

"We will not make that decision until we get all of the information we need. We want to get it done the right way – and if we don't get that by January, the Board may decide not to take action."