

# Aldermen approve of design Smith Level changes pass by a close vote

## Grant permit for third high school

BY MEGHAN DAVIS  
STAFF WRITER

The area's newest high school should be a welcome addition to its surroundings after local officials smooth out wrinkles in development plans.

Representatives of Chapel-Hill Carrboro City Schools presented their plans for the site of the district's third high school — now estimated to be about \$7 million over original cost estimates — to the Carrboro Board of Aldermen on Tuesday at a public hearing.

After considering input from neighbors around the site — between Smith Level and Rock Haven roads — the aldermen were unanimous in granting the project a conditional-use permit.

"I don't think there's a CUP condition with which we disagree," said Steve Scroggs, assistant superintendent for support services.

The school is scheduled to open

in fall 2007.

The aldermen praised the school's most recent design, achieved after years of planning.

"On top of being excited about having a state-of-the-art high school in Carrboro for the first time, this design is so forward-thinking," Alderman Alex Zaffron said.

The school will feature environmentally friendly features, including a rainwater collection system and windows designed to let in daylight that also reflect prominent downtown architecture, Scroggs said.

"Each of these things in and of itself is a design project," Town Planner Jeff Kleaveland said.

Residents who live near the site also seemed pleased with the school's design but expressed concern with the project's potential impact on their homes.

"The neighborhood would like to express its appreciation in choosing this site," said Vince Donnelly, president of the Kent Woodlands homeowners association.

"We ask the town not to reduce the number of parking lots to ensure that students are not tempt-

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ALEX ZAFFRON, ALDERMAN

ed to park in neighborhoods such as ours," Donnelly said.

The number of parking spaces — one of the reasons for planning delays — is now set at 328.

Ray Road neighbors also asked the aldermen to look at ways to prevent their area from turning into a receptacle for overflow parking.

"It's already really hard for us to get out to Smith Level Road in the mornings," road resident Livy Ludington said.

"I really wish that (the N.C. Department of Transportation) would maybe look at Ray Road and what's going to happen to us once this school is built."

To assuage concerns, the aldermen voted against a proposed pedestrian and bicycle path connecting the school to the road.

"I think that this path will sim-

ply encourage the use of Ray Road as a kiss-and-go lane," Alderman Jacquelyn Gist said.

Mayor Mike Nelson added a suggestion that the aldermen petition NCDOT to restrict on-street parking on Ray Road.

Neighbors also asked the aldermen to preserve all possible green space around the school.

The tract is heavily wooded, with parts sitting on top of the Morgan Creek and University Lake watersheds.

"We have a real appreciation for the serenity of the woods, and this is going to have a major impact on our lives," Ludington said.

"Think about when all those trees start coming down."

Contact the City Editor at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

BY TED STRONG  
ASSISTANT CITY EDITOR

After more than two decades of debating the issue, Carrboro leaders have decided on the best way to improve Smith Level Road, though the project might see its 25th year before construction begins.

The plan to make the road a three-lane thoroughfare with a bike lane and sidewalk on each side passed by a close 4-2 vote Tuesday night.

This decision ensured that several important safety concerns about the project will eventually be addressed but left some officials worried by the project's scope and short-term safety.

Mayor Mike Nelson and Alderman Jacquelyn Gist voted against the proposal. Alderman Mark Chilton was absent from the meeting.

The aldermen had to choose between two options for expanding the road between Morgan Creek and Rock Haven roads, near where the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools district plans to construct its third high school.

The first option, which was eventually rejected, was to use funding from a state program called Moving Ahead to improve the road on a smaller scale.

The project would only have included two lanes of traffic plus a sidewalk and bike lane on the west side of the road.

The option would have cost more than the larger option approved Tuesday because the town would have been required to pay up to \$300,000 of the cost for rights-of-way needed for construction.

Town staff estimated that such a move would have resulted in a town tax increase of up to eight cents, a consequence aldermen were not eager to embrace.

"That eight cents — I look at it and I just want to shake my head," Alderman Joal Hall Broun said.

The move also would have prevented the use of the Moving Ahead funds to put in sidewalks near Chapel Hill High School on Homestead Road between Rogers and High School roads, delaying the project indefinitely.

*"I hate the position we're being put in. ... I'm not going to vote for either (of the proposals)."*

JACQUELYN GIST, ALDERMAN

"It just blows my mind that we're put in a position of having to choose which neighborhood school children to protect," Nelson said about his safety concerns with each option.

The approved project will use state Transportation Improvement Program funds to create the three-lane look for Smith Level Road.

The town will only be required to pay for 30 percent of the sidewalk funding, expected to be about \$65,000, and the Moving Ahead funds will still be available for the Homestead Road project.

A main drawback is that state transportation improvement funding is determined years in advance, and it is expected that work on the Smith Level project will not begin for between three and a half and five years.

The delay precludes any chance of the improvements being in place for the projected opening of the third high school in fall 2007.

This was bothersome to Nelson.

"Oh, I'm just sick about it," he said of the project.

"I'm very afraid we're going to have a dead kid out there," he added.

The proposals the aldermen considered Tuesday were the result of considerable negotiation between the town and the N.C. Department of Transportation, which had advocated for a proposal featuring a four-lane road divided by a median.

Many aldermen disliked parts of both options, even though they were results of compromise.

"I hate the position that we're being put in for ridiculous reasons," Gist said. "I'm not going to vote for either of them."

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# Commissioners target funding equity

BY ADAM W. RHEW  
STAFF WRITER

Tensions continued to build among local leaders Tuesday about what many call the tightest budget process in recent memory.

The Orange County Board of Commissioners met with both the Chapel Hill-Carrboro and Orange County boards of education to discuss issues that will affect each of their 2005-06 fiscal year budgets.

County Budget Director Donna Dean first reviewed with officials seven options to revise the process by which the commissioners allot funding for capital projects.

Commissioners Chairman Moses Carey Jr. said the current method for approving capital funding is confusing.

"The current policy is a hodgepodge of very complex and difficult-to-track decisions," he said.

The policy now sells itself as an even split in the amount of net funding available for capital projects between county and schools needs, though schools have received upward of 77 percent of those funds in recent years.

Under all the proposed policies for next fiscal year, the available funds will be split with 60 percent going to school needs and 40 percent earmarked for county projects — an advantage for the county.

"If you pursue (the 60/40 split), the Orange County government will receive more revenue than it would under the base amount," said County Manager John Link.

The issue of capital funding has received increased attention recently, as both districts begin the process of building new schools.

Commissioner Alice Gordon asked school leaders to provide the board with the costs associated with the districts' other capital projects.

But city school board Chairwoman Lisa Stuckey said the boards were not asked to provide those estimates to county staff.

"The staff might have asked not to include it, but the commissioners are now saying include it," Gordon responded.

And capital funding was not the only issue discussed Tuesday to cause tempers to flare.

Leaders also discussed a study

completed by UNC School of Education professor Madeleine Grumet — one that shows a significant funding disparity between city and county schools.

The study showed that city schools have almost \$13 million more in available funding, mostly due to a special district tax that is specifically earmarked for education.

Several commissioners said they should focus on defining exactly what equity means before pursuing policies to close any gap between the districts.

"We do need a working definition of equity," said Valerie Foushee, commissioner and former city school board member.

County school board member Elizabeth Brown said her definition of the term translates to equal funding for both districts.

"We're all in the same county," she said. "The students should be getting the same amount of money, and the teachers should be paid the same."

But two of Brown's colleagues denied that a funding gap exists.

Al Hartkopf and Randy Copeland both said there is no funding prob-

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MOSES CAREY JR., COMMISSIONER

lem between the districts.

"(County schools) are well-funded compared to other counties in the state," Copeland said.

Libbie Hough, county school board chairwoman, said outside of the equity question are real concerns that her district is facing.

"We aren't crying wolf about some of the challenges we're facing in this county," she said.

Several politicians were quick to point out the difficulty commissioners will face in weighing the needs of their constituents.

"The demands are going to keep on coming," Copeland said.

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