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School replacement created challenges for school board in 2018

By LAUREN MCDONALD lmcdonald@thebrunswicknews.com Dec 29, 2018



The Glynn County School System is moving forward with a plan to relocate Altama Elementary School.

Plans are now moving smoothly forward to begin construction on a new Altama Elementary School.

Glynn County Schools recently received approval from the Georgia Department of Education on its site application to build the new school at 6045 Altama Ave. in Brunswick, three-fourths of a mile from the current 53-year-old school building.

The road to this point in the process, though, has been bumpy.

The Glynn County Board of Education and district leaders faced criticism from many community members earlier this year when the school board voted to build the new school on the same 18 acres on which the current school is located, at 5505 Altama Ave.

The property sits adjacent to one of four Superfund sites in Glynn County. Superfund sites are areas that have been contaminated by hazardous waste and ordered by the federal government to be cleaned up or mitigated.

Many voiced concerns that building the new school on that property would lead to future health issues for the school's occupants.

The school board changed its plans in response and voted in July to build the school at a new site.

"We have worked hard to be transparent and open in finding the best site for this new school," said Virgil Cole, superintendent of Glynn County Schools, at the meeting July 10. "The question we have continually asked ourselves is where is the best place for this school."

Looking back

The year began with a school board meeting at which board members were given a report about the toxaphene levels on the current school site.

The board had asked in 2017 that tests be done on the site to ensure it would be safe for the new school.

Rick Ricci, a senior project geologist for Terracon Consultants, told school board members that testing samples had come back "non-detect" for toxaphene.

Other site options at the time included a site on Habersham Street across from the former Brunswick High School and a site near Ga. Hwy. 99.

By March, the school system had determined that the site was safe for the new school construction. Cole gave a presentation March 27 at Altama Elementary School to parents, school staff and community members that explained the testing that had been done and the reasons for which the school system and the school's staff felt that the current site was the best option.

“We feel like we have done our due diligence with this and have done a thorough job, and we wouldn’t be going down this road if we didn’t feel that way,” Cole said at the time.

But others at the meeting questioned the safety of this plan, due to the 16.5 acre Hercules 009 Superfund site that sits adjacent to the northern side of the current school property.

The Superfund site was placed on the Environmental Protection Agency’s “National Priorities List” in 1984 because of contaminated groundwater, sludge and soil from industrial operations.

Daniel Parshley, representing the Glynn Environmental Coalition, said at the meeting that the EPA had stated in a 2016 report on the Hercules site that no issues of exposure from the site exist because the adjacent property was not in use.

“I’m not telling you not to build the school,” he said. “I’m not telling you to build the school. I’m only here to provide the information that the EPA provided in their 2016 report.”

The school’s staff, including its principal Michelle Drew, supported the school board’s plan to build on the current site and insisted that the best option was to keep the school in the same area.

After hearing feedback from the community following the presentation, the school board voted unanimously April 10 to begin the site approval process to build the new school on the current school site.

At that meeting, before the vote, Glynn Environmental Coalition’s project manager Rachael Thompson asked the school board to take several actions on the site.

“Keeping in mind that the community has repeatedly asked for a local community school, we believe that additional actions can be taken to diminish the potential human health risks,” she said at the meeting. “However, our initial recommendation would be not to build the school on the current site, which is less than 1,500 feet from the Hercules 009 Superfund site.”

The school board’s next meeting May 8 was standing room only as a number of community members were in attendance to protest the decision to build the new school at the current site.

“The board of education has this amazing opportunity to fix a wrong that should never have happened in the first place,” said Jen Hilburn, the Altamaha Riverkeeper, in an address to the board at the meeting. “Move the children away from toxic pollution. Why is this not obvious?”

School board members defended their decision and insisted that due diligence had been administered to ensure the property's safety.

"Student safety is our first and foremost concern, and we want students to be safe and in a healthy environment," school board member Hank Yeargan told The News in May.

Changing track

The community, though, was adamantly against the plan to build a new school on the current site.

"I think that the community is unified against this," Glynn County Commissioner Allen Booker told The News in May. "I've heard from a cross-section of people, regardless of their party affiliation and regardless of their race. I think that people just in general feel that this is a bad idea."

The school board listened and found a new site.

The board voted unanimously at a meeting July 10 to authorize school officials to execute a contract to purchase 27.65 acres of land at 6045 Altama Ave. for construction of the new school.

The land purchase contract had several preceding conditions, and the purchase price was not to exceed \$1.4 million.

The school board later received approval from Glynn County to use the parcel of land and then applied for state site approval.

Now that the state education department has approved the site, the school system is able to move forward with the purchase of the land. A consultant hired by the school board has delineated the wetlands on the property.

Site work will begin once that delineation has been approved.

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