Concerned citizens ask school board to change new Altama site plan

By LAUREN MCDONALD lmcdonald@thebrunswicknews.com  May 8, 2018

Many community members attended the Glynn County Board of Education meeting Tuesday to speak against the planned construction site for the new Altama Elementary School.

The school board meeting room was standing room only during the portion of the meeting when the public is invited to address the board. Seven people spoke during the comment section against the school system’s current plan to build Altama Elementary’s replacement on the same property where the school currently sits. That property sits adjacent to one of Glynn County’s four Superfund sites, which are areas that have been contaminated by hazardous waste.

“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, who spoke at the meeting. “Move the children away from toxic pollution. Why is this not obvious?”

The school board voted unanimously April 10 to build the new school on the current 18-acre property at 5505 Altama Ave.

The school system has since begun the process to obtain site approval from Georgia’s Department of Education to build the school on that property.

The property sits adjacent to the Hercules 009 Superfund site, which the Environmental Protection Agency placed on a “National Priorities List” in 1984 due to pollution on the site.

The school system spent several months this year testing the property for potential hazards. Terracon Consultants was hired to conduct the tests, which came back showing non-detectable levels of hazardous chemicals.
“We wanted to know if there were any potential environmental contamination issues with our property,” wrote Glynn County Schools Superintendent Virgil Cole in a message posted on social media Monday. “When the tests came back negative, we asked Terracon to take it a step further by conducting more extensive tests throughout the entire property, including digging wells. These tests came back negative as well.”

The school system plans to also include sentinel wells, which monitor ground water, along the property line, as well as additional fill dirt and a vapor intrusion barrier beneath the school building.

“As with all of our schools, the top priority is to provide a safe learning environment where teachers can teach and students can succeed,” Cole wrote. “As we move forward with the new Altama Elementary School project, we welcome your continued engagement.”

LaTonya Abbott-Austin asked the board to reconsider its decision to build the new school next to a Superfund site.

“I have family members that attend Altama Elementary,” she said. “... I think that this decision sends a poor message to our community and our children. The health of our children should be a top priority. Please select a location that is not next to a toxic dumping ground.”

Those who attended the meeting to speak against the current plan coordinated by wearing red shirts.

“Tonight we have members of the environmental group, members of the Chamber of Commerce, we have Democrats and Republicans, we have African Americans and caucasians and we have folks from the islands and from the mainland,” Austin said. “Very few issues unite these groups. Tonight we come together and ask you to pick a different site for the children of Altama Elementary.”

Hilburn asked why the school board has chosen to take what she considers to be a potential risk for students.

“Why not just protect our school children from potentially-damaging harm?” she said. “This location is shortsighted. When pollution contaminates our children, not only does it impact them as individuals but it impacts our entire community.”

She also suggested that the decision would be handled differently if the school served a different student population.
“It’s interesting to note that this school will educate more than 90 percent minorities,” she said. “And I ask you, if we were talking about educating St. Simons Island residents or Jekyll Island residents, would we even be having this conversation?”

School board member John Madala directly addressed this comment later in the meeting. After the public comment portion, he defended the school board’s decision and strongly assured that due diligence has been taken to ensure the property is safe for students.

“Even somebody referred to it as a color issue. Really? No,” he said. “We’re doing the best that we can for our children in this community.”

The school board and school administrators have been transparent throughout the entire decision-making process, Madala said.

“We’ve done way more than our due diligence. Way more,” he said. “We didn’t just say ‘Hey, let’s just go ahead and build the school back there.’ We’re doing what the community, which is the school, which are the children, want us to do ... We’re going above and beyond.”

Michelle Drew, principal at Altama Elementary, also spoke at the meeting, and she strongly asserted that she feels the current plan is what’s best for her school’s students, families and staff.

“I believe that placing our school where it is is not going to be detrimental to our children,” she said. “Our children need us to make the right decision for them, and I do believe that the right decision is to build it where it is located now.”

Lauren McDonald