Glynn County Schools leadership has determined the current site of Altama Elementary School would be the best location for the school’s replacement.

The 18-acre property on which the school currently sits provides enough space to build a new school behind the current 54-year old building, said Virgil Cole, superintendent, and keeping the school at the same location would benefit its community.
Cole presented this update to the project at a meeting Tuesday at the school. Parents, students, school staff and other interested community members attended the meeting.

“The school would be shifted basically about 300 yards or so behind it,” Cole said. “... This would easily fit on the property we've got here.”

About an acre and a half of wetlands exist on the current property that would need to be mitigated, Cole said.

When Cole joined the school system in July, he said the school board had tentatively approved a site on Habersham Street in Brunswick for the new school. Further research, though, revealed extensive wetlands that would require a two-story school design, which would be unideal for an elementary school, Cole said.

“The question I asked was what’s wrong with the current Altama school site,” he said. “We have land there. We're doing the same thing right now at Burroughs-Molette.”

Altama Elementary administrators and staff said at the meeting that they support the plan. Others in attendance, though, questioned the safety of the site, due to the proximity of a former Hercules landfill.

A 16.5 acre Hercules 009 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.

That site sits adjacent to the northern side of the current school property.

Over the past several months, the school system has conducted a series of tests on the site. Terracon Consultants conducted the tests, which came back showing nondetectable levels of the chemical benzene.

“We just got the results back, and all of that has come back negative,” Cole said.

At the meeting, discussion focused on whether sufficient testing has been completed on the current school site to determine that the adjacent superfund site does not contain contamination levels that could potentially harm students.
Daniel Parshley, the project manager for the Glynn Environmental Coalition, said the EPA 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.

“They didn’t find a current issue because the property was not in use,” Parshley said. “To summarize, there’s a little bit more work they need to do at this site. I’m not telling you not to build the school. 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.”

Rick Ricci, a senior project geologist for Terracon Consultants who led the testing on Altama’s property, told meeting participants that based on the information provided by the tests conducted so far, no further testing is required.

“We would have done deeper analysis if we had any reason to do it,” he said.

A parent in attendance argued that if more testing would appease the school’s parents then further testing should be done to further confirm that the site is safe.

School board member John Madala encouraged families at the meeting to tell the school system where they’d like to see the new school built.

“It’s time for Altama Elementary to be replaced, he said.

“We don’t need to fix it. We need a new one,” Madala said. “What we did with ESPLIT 3 was that we wanted to continue to build 100-years worth of schools ... (Altama Elementary is) 54 years old. It’s time to go ... We can do better.”

Cynthia Ford, a teacher at Burroughs-Molette Elementary and PTA president for Altama Elementary, said she supports building on the current site because doing so would benefit the school’s community.

At Burroughs-Molette, where the school’s replacement is being built now on the same site, she said morale has been lifted as teachers and students watch their new building emerge outside their classroom windows.

“We are too in a building that is very old,” she said. “We have plumbing issues ... When it’s cold during the winter, the halls are cold, the classrooms are cold, the bathrooms are cold. The kids have to wear jackets all day, and so do the teachers. We are elated to have a new school go up in the same area.”
Altama Elementary’s administrators and staff assured those in attendance at the meeting that they agree with district leadership that the current site is the best option.

“The district people met with us, went over the whole layout of it and told us what they were going to do to make sure the land is clear,” said Rhonda Jaudon, assistant principal at Altama. “... Our students will have the experience of watching their school come up and watch the process. But not only that — they have the opportunity to be a part of history.”

The administrative team and district leaders would not say the land was fitting, she said, if they thought it possibly unsafe for the students.

And simply fixing up the current school is not the solution, said Michelle Drew, principal at the school.

Plumbing and electrical wiring in the 54-year-old building are in desperate need of replacement, she said. Several times, the school’s plumbing has broken, requiring the school to bus every student to Brunswick High School to use the restroom.

“If we continue, we’re not going to know how many times we’re going to have a plumbing issue and we have to take all of the children to another school for restrooms,” she said. “That interrupts instruction.”

A new school building on the current site is in the best interest of Altama’s families, Drew said, and the project is a long time coming.

“A lot of times our students, not just at Altama, but our students in general, sometimes may take a backseat. That’s my perception,” she said. “... When I watch stadiums go up, when I watch ball fields being built, but we have to take a trip to the restroom, I have a problem.”

The students deserve the best, she said.

“If we expect the best from them, we have to give them the best back,” Drew said. “If a new building is going to be what it takes, give them the building.”

The final decision has yet to be made, Cole said, and he encouraged community feedback on the plan.

“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,” he said.
Lauren McDonald

Altama LSI Map and Lab Results
Provided documents  Mar 28, 2018