

BV
Sub-P.S. - Restructuring

Desegregation key to BUSD reorganization plan, says task force

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 By Shannon Morgan

The question of how and if grade configurations in Berkeley schools should be altered before the district moves forward with plans to rehabilitate school buildings is turning out to be a difficult one to answer.

Members of the School Organization Task Force appointed by BUSD Superintendent Dr. LaVonecia Steele are charged with recommending policy shifts for the district to consider in implementing Measure A School bond funds to seismically upgrade Berkeley schools. According to the current timetable, task force recommendations are due in less than one week.

As the deadline looms the group first must decide what type of desegregation policy it should recommend to the board.

"All of this stuff about races and ethnicities are very difficult for people to deal with. It's very slow going. It's almost like wading through glue," said SOTF facilitator Jim Masters.

According to Masters, the task force views recommending a desegregation policy as preliminary to plans for new grade configurations.

With only one meeting left on Tuesday in the SOTF's appointed life-span, members seem to be a long way from making final recommendations — the task force has yet to decide which ethnic groups desegregation policy should apply to, what mechanism should be used to accomplish desegregation goals or what grade configurations schools should take in the future.

SOTF member Don Larkin said it is important for the committee to hash out the desegregation issue before moving forward.

"The reason we were charged with (this task) is because there was recognition that schools are racially out of balance currently," he said.

Other have questioned the necessity of working out a new desegregation policy.

"With two schools closed right now, all things considered, (desegregation goals) are not that far out of whack," said SOTF member Monica Thyberg.

The task force is being asked to make its recommendations to the BUSD Board of Directors by Feb. 3 so that the board can inform

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Measure A construction planners of physical changes needed to accommodate new school configurations. Measure A construction planners are scheduled to recommend a construction plan to the board by March 15.

In a presentation to task force members Dec. 15, Steele said if the task force is unable to come up with recommendations by the appointed deadline the BUSD board may go ahead and make the decisions.

The statement brought complaints from some task force members that the process had been mishandled and members had not been allowed to make "well-thought out recommendations" and that the task force was only set up with the pretense of community input.

While Steele denied the allegation, she reiterated that the board would not extend the Feb. 3 deadline, which was already extended from its original Jan. 11 deadline for recommendations.

At its meeting Tuesday SOTF members spent more than two hours trying to establish a desegregation policy but were unable to finalize their recommendations by the end of the meeting.

So far the task force has decided

that it wants to continue the district's policy of ensuring that each school will have a student population which reflects a racial balance consistent with the district-wide racial make up.

"It was proposed that (the recommendation) would become a policy that is uniformly enforced but the committee softened that, making it a goal," Masters noted.

The task force also voted to continue the goal that racial balance be defined as being within 5 percent of a given group's district-wide ratio.

But the task force was unable to determine whether the desegregation goal should apply to white students only (as it does now) or should include both black and white students, or an even larger number of ethnic groups. Those matters are scheduled for discussion at the group's final meeting next Tuesday.

"I don't know whether they are going to be able to finish it or not. I'm hoping that once people have the basics around methodologies (to implement desegregation goals) it can relatively quickly make comparisons between those methodologies and standards" for each school, Masters said.

Grade configurations

Masters noted that once issues around desegregation are resolved

it should be relatively easy for the task force to make final recommendations on school configuration.

At this point it appears a majority of elementary schools would like to change from the current system of K-3 and 4-6 schools to K-5 schools. However, there are schools like Malcolm X, which wants to remain 4-6 and Longfellow, which cannot decide how to alter its current 4-6 configuration, that could make it difficult to come up with a satisfactory overall grade configuration policy.

Instead, Masters said, different configuration standards could be applied with a mixture of new school zones and controlled choice (whereby parents would be allowed to select the school their child will attend).

"What people will discover is that these are really independent variables and it's possible to accomplish desegregation goals with any grade configuration," Masters said.

However, one thing that the board will have to take into consideration is that while it has funds to physically upgrade school sites through Measure A, the bond money cannot be used to implement new programs that may go along with different grade configuration operations.