

Thompson: Class size amendment could force district to rezone

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NAPLES — Some Gulf Coast Sharks could call themselves Golden Gate Titans next fall.

Changing schools could be in the cards for students at several schools that are at capacity across the Collier County School District if the district is forced to implement a class size amendment passed by voters in 2002, Superintendent Dennis Thompson told a group of about 40 community members Monday afternoon.

Thompson was invited to speak to the League of Women Voters of Collier County Monday to update the organization's members on the state of the Collier County School District.

The biggest budgetary challenge for the district is implementing changes needed for the class size amendment, he said.

Thompson said an alternative the district is looking at to meet additional costs incurred from the amendment is rezoning schools throughout the district.

"When the class size amendment fully kicks in, we can bring in portables or go through rezoning," Thompson said. "The classic example is Gulf Coast High School and Golden Gate High School. Gulf Coast is at capacity with 2,162 kids as of Friday. Golden Gate High School has 30 percent open capacity. And there are a few hundred kids who live closer to Golden Gate than they do to Gulf Coast."

Thompson said the other alternative would be to reduce the number of classes with fewer than 25 students. But he said he is opposed to that change because it would take opportunities away from students.

Thompson said Legislators told the district that it is unlikely lawmakers will take up the issue this legislative season. The reason, he said, is politics. He said the Democratic Party's biggest candidate for U.S. Senate is Rep. Kendrick Meeks, who wrote the class size legislation as a state legislator. On the Republican side, the polling numbers indicate voters do not want to make a change to the amendment.

“There will be significant challenges to implementing this since the state does not have the money,” Thompson said. “That means it will fall to the local districts to do it.”

Concerned about class sizes that were reaching 40 students or more, the constitutional amendment calls for the number of students per classroom to be limited in core classes such as English and math.

Currently, districts are held to school averages, meaning the 18-student limit in pre-kindergarten through third-grade classes still can be met if some classes have 20 or more students as long as the overall average is 18 or below. The class size limit for fourth- to eighth-grade classes is 22 students and it is 25 students per class for high schools. Schools not meeting the requirement face fines.

Under the timeline for the amendment’s implementation, the limit must be met in individual classes, not school averages by 2010-11.

The Collier County School District prepared a class-size reduction survey for the Florida Association of District School Superintendents last year using the districts 2007-08 data. The survey shows all of the district’s elementary, middle and high schools were in compliance this year but the district has between 30 and 46 percent of its classes still over the classroom cap.

The Collier district estimates it would need to hire an additional 45 prekindergarten through third-grade teachers; 22 fourth- and fifth-grade teachers; 43 middle school teachers; and 74 high school teachers to meet the needs of going to the class average.

Assuming an average teacher salary and benefits of \$68,000, the total cost to hire teachers would be more than \$12.5 million. But that cost does not include things such as technology costs, materials, air conditioning, lights and custodial costs.

Thompson said whatever decision is made, it will need to be done before February, which is when the state Legislature convenes. He said schools will have to know how many students to expect before they can start scheduling, which begins in the spring.

Other issues Thompson touched on included the proposed change to the district’s sex education policy. The Collier County School Board voted to rewrite the policy after some board members complained it was vague.

Thompson told the audience he did not approve of the way the School Board developed the policy.

“The board developed the policy at the dais. It was a little out of control, he said. “We are teaching the kids the correct things. ... The problem came in the sixth grade. There were some

curriculum issues, which I think could have been resolved with additional support for early middle school teachers.”

Lydia Galton wanted to know what Thompson thought was so objectionable about President Barack Obama’s speech that he would not show it in Collier County Public Schools.

Thompson said he found nothing objectionable about Obama’s comments, but said on no single issue has he received more feedback. He said the district received 5,000 phone calls and e-mails with an 8 to 1 ratio against showing the speech.

“I had parents telling me they would pull their students from school or wanted them to opt out of the class during the time the speech was shown,” he said. “The question, then, is what do you do with those students?”

His reason for not showing the speech, he said, was the timing.

“The speech was played during lunch time, so you have students at lunch, at recess. What are you supposed to do with them?” he said. “In the high schools, the speech was scheduled during a passing period. There was so much organizational chaos, it was impossible.”

