

Schools have names, but no firm funding plan

Ron Schaming ■ News Editor

The Hardin County Board of Education has named the two new schools now under construction, but a county funding shortfall threatens to leave one a monumental embarrassment to local government.

The 550-student facility going up near Walmart on the Roach property is now Northside Elementary.

The nearly identical school rising on the former sod farm off Florence Road is Southeast Hardin Elementary.

According to county Director of Schools John Thomas, all construction for the latter is on schedule and progressing well. Southeast Hardin is expected to open in the fall of 2010, and renovations to existing schools completed by that time.

However, "Northside Elementary will hopefully open a year later in fall of 2011, if funding is found. The board also told Inman Construction to get Northside Elementary 'in the dry,'" meaning the roof, windows and all exterior doors will be installed, he said. "We will now wait for the other \$7 million to complete Northside."

Instead of trimming the underfunded construction project, local school officials elected to proceed as originally planned, raising the possibility Northside will not be completed.

Thomas said Tuesday that although he is not involved in negotiations between the county and Savannah on the funding issue, "I'm hearing rumors the two governments are talking."

However, neither side demonstrated much of a thaw when

contacted by The Courier.

County Mayor Kevin Davis continues to maintain that in allocating \$30 million for the county's nearly \$37 million project, Hardin County has done all it can financially and that the ball is now in the city's court.

The county is funding the project with local option sales tax proceeds and has not raised property taxes.

"I'm still hoping there will be no delay" in the opening of Northside, Davis said.

Savannah City Manager Garry Welch says the best opportunity for fully funding the county's responsibility for education involves a change in the city's Tennessee River Resort District Act status that would funnel more state money to the county.

But doing so will require an act of the already cash-strapped Tennessee legislature and is not likely to be a quick fix.

"That's the most obvious solution to the problem," Welch said.

Asked why a state legislature caught in a budget crisis would want to spend more money on Hardin County, he said, "Something's done every year to help somebody."

Assuming Northside Elementary does not open next fall as originally planned, a leadership team of school administrators is examining where to draw zoning lines to determine which of the five existing elementary schools planned for closure will remain open.

Thomas said closing Whites, Walnut Grove, Nixon and Walker elementary schools and leaving open North Elementary in Savannah would provide the greatest cost savings.



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