

Leaky ceilings, outdated science labs, shifting foundations: A look inside some of Hamilton County's schools

December 15, 2019 by Meghan Mangrum | Updated December 15, 2019 at 9:09

a.m.



Gerald Harris stood at the top of a set of concrete bleachers overlooking the school's track and football field, his back to the white and red concession stand.

Despite peeling paint and sagging wooden walls, the stand still showcases signs commemorating historic victories - the 1997 football state championship and the 2013 and 2014 girls track and field state wins.

Harris, principal and alumnus of Tyner Academy, scanned the field, brown from December rains and winter weather. Then he spread his arms wide and said, "Imagine what this place could look like. Imagine what we could do here."

Sports facilities don't make a school; Harris and educators like him know. And it's common in a school district with 74 school buildings for some projects to get shuttered while others take priority.

Hamilton County Schools has spent \$93 million on a backlog of maintenance and facilities improvements in the past decade. Nineteen of its school buildings are considered poor or unsatisfactory facilities, according to a preliminary report presented by MGT Consulting to the Board of Education and Hamilton County Commission this summer.

It isn't only Tyner's ballfields that are failing its students - so are its classrooms, according to the consultants.

For several months this spring, MGT assessors walked every school and evaluated the physical conditions of the buildings and grounds, the suitability of existing classrooms and resources for the education programs the building is meant to provide, and the technology readiness of each building, according to Dan Schmidt, director of MGT's Education Consulting Group.

The preliminary report has identified more than \$1.36 billion in capital needs across 74 schools. It also recommends renovating 11 schools, adding to 10 schools, erecting new buildings for three schools and closing 15 school facilities.

The district's chief of staff, Nakia Towns Edwards, has said it's "a facilities crisis."

District officials say it will take months to finalize a recommendation and even longer to figure out if there is funding for any solution deemed viable.

But school leaders also say that many community members only know what their school looks like - the one they attended decades ago or the one their children or grandchildren attend. Many don't understand the realities, said Krystal Scarbrough, principal of Chattanooga School for the Liberal Arts.

The Times Free Press toured more than a dozen schools in December. Reporters talked with principals, school leaders and veteran teachers.

Here is a glimpse inside some of the worst school facilities in Hamilton County based on the report.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

In July 2019, MGT Consulting Group unveiled a preliminary facilities report to the Hamilton County Commission and Board of Education that identified \$1.36 billion in deferred maintenance across 74 school facilities. The report recommended an \$855 million plan to renovate and rebuild facilities. The Times Free Press toured more than a dozen schools in December. Reporters and photographers talked with principals, school leaders and veteran teachers who know what takes place within the walls of these schools. We visited classrooms, playgrounds, sports facilities, cafeterias, even bathrooms. We also attended three of five community forums hosted by MGT across the district to gather input and feedback from the community about its initial recommendation. The following stories share what we found and what we heard.

[Search by school: What the Hamilton County Schools' preliminary facilities report](#)

could mean for your school- Tell us what you think: What do you think are the biggest issues with Hamilton County Schools facilities?

Tyner Academy - Built in 1938. Score: 58/100. Recommended to be torn down.

There are five science labs on the second floor of Tyner Academy, the high school that sits across Tyner Road from the middle school. Each lab looks a little different thanks to small-scale renovations that have occurred over the years "when there was some money," said Joey Gaby, the school's chemistry teacher.

Gaby has taught at the school for 21 years, in the same classroom. She loves her room. She has space for student desks for group lessons, as well as lab tables. She also has her own thermostat; her room is heated and cooled by the school's centralized system.

But down the hall, most of the classrooms have portable window units. Most are smaller, with large, antiquated, hexagon-shaped desks that are immobile. Teachers and students work around them.

Gaby is thankful though. When the school became a magnet school in 1999 and annexed the old Academy of Math, Science and Technology, it got to keep a storage room as a place to safely house lab equipment and chemicals.

Down the road at East Ridge High School, not every class can even perform experiments - the lab settings don't all have the safety measures required to use chemicals. Sinks don't work and neither does the gas line, thanks to a leak.

MGT's preliminary facilities report recommends that Tyner Academy be torn down. District officials and community members have been discussing and debating the report for months.

According to MGT, the high school building is one of the county's worst. It received a 57 out of 100 on overall building condition - it has open spaces that present security concerns, small classrooms that physically prevent adding additional students, water leaks and dilapidated lockers. It earned a 70 out of 100 for technology suitability and even less - a 34 - for grounds conditions.

MGT recommends combining the 520-student school with the 470-student school to form a grades 6-12 school on the same site. But that was already the plan - supposedly.

In 2017, thanks to more than \$100 million in bond funds from the county for capital projects, Tyner was set to be merged and Chattanooga School for the Liberal Arts was to be moved into the old middle school building.

But the plan was put on hold after MGT - which was hired by the school board for more than \$500,000 in December 2018 - released its report.

The money is still there, but the decision about what to do with the three schools is on hold.

Photo Gallery

Tyner Academy facilities



Chattanooga School for the Liberal Arts - Built in 1949. Score: 54/100.

Recommended to be torn down.

Students moved independently, darting to lunch or to the restroom, as Krystal Scarbrough made her way down the hallways of CSLA, one of Hamilton County's original K-8 magnet schools.

She paused and pointed to a crack that zigzagged up a brick wall.

"We have a foundation that is shifting," she said. The nearly 100-year-old building is settling, its foundation along with it.

The signs are seen on the third floor, where lockers are no longer flush with their neighbors or the wall. Or in a bathroom on the second floor, where a wall leans over, braced by a barrier of tiles that serve as its baseboard.

Scarborough has been principal at the school, which currently has about 450 students, for 11 years and said it looks about the same. She gives Hamilton County Schools' maintenance team credit for doing what they can.

On the day the Times Free Press toured the school, maintenance team members were working in the school's library to find the source of a water leak that had sprung up over Thanksgiving break. Water pooled behind shelves and in the corner. Furniture was pushed across the room to allow for large dryers.

The school's librarian, Jennifer Fields, sat in the hallway making corn-husk dolls for a lesson.

Maintenance team members often respond to the school for water leaks but also to repair the decades-old air conditioning window units, or to try and seal cracks around doors and windows that let in the winter air - and rodents. Some of the windows don't close, some are taped shut.

Most teachers decorate them and make do with their spaces. For example, two teams of first grade teachers share a large double classroom and divide the room so 40 little ones spread between them don't get distracted by the class on the other side.

Physical education teacher Drew White demonstrated how to swing a golf club in the school's tiny gym. It was comfortable in there that day temperature-wise because air and heat window units were added just a few summers ago. But gym supplies are still stored in a nearby boy's bathroom, and it's hard to throw a basketball back in bounds thanks to tight court space.

"It's hard for me to balance that your kids are safe and secure because the building looks like a disaster zone," Scarbrough said of her efforts to reassure anxious parents.

When the \$28 million plan to merge Tyner's middle and high schools and move CSLA into the old middle school building was put on hold, parents weren't surprised.

They'd been promised a new building before. In 2013, dozens of parents campaigned for a new building on the site. In a 1999 facilities review, CSLA was identified as the fifth worst school facility in the district and was slated to be closed and rebuilt.

But still the building stands.

Taxpayers need to understand what schools truly look like, Scarbrough said. Taxpayers need to decide what is acceptable for children.

Photo Gallery

Chattanooga School for the Liberal Arts facilities



East Ridge High School - Built in 1958. Score: 64/100. Recommended to be renovated.

The walls rain bricks onto unlucky staff members who park between the high school and the middle school. Two science labs have to turn off their gas because of a leak and only have one chemical safety hood between them. The gymnasium is stained with old water leaks, and its high windows seep in heavy rains.

But unlike CSLA, at least East Ridge has an elevator.

In 1999, 15 of the 82 schools evaluated didn't have one but needed one. Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, safety windows, elevator installations and asbestos abatement were the most frequent recommendations in the facilities report, completed by an external committee of 15 community members for the school board.

Tim James, teacher and head football coach at East Ridge High School, said student athletes notice the difference in facilities across the district. They see and use other gyms, courts, fields and locker rooms. They note the difference between their facilities and those of other public and private schools against whom they compete.

James said schools will often lose several good players every year, especially after middle school, when they are drawn to some of the high-quality athletic programs and facilities at area private schools like McCallie School and Baylor School.

The coach said East Ridge's gym is a great facility. It got new bleachers recently and has had fresh coats of paint over the years.

"One of the biggest problems though is with leaks," James said of the gym's ceiling. "It's really a design issue."

In the 1990s, air conditioning was added to the facility, which is actually the "new gym" built in 1986, but the retrofitted heating, ventilation and air conditioning system has led to water damage across the gym's ceiling. Water comes not only from the sky,

but from the ground, as well. Last summer, district maintenance crews had to battle groundwater seeping into the storage closets at the far end of the gym, where equipment like cheerleading mats are stored.

As of December 2019, despite a drier floor and fresh paint, the closets still carry the musty scent of mold.

East Ridge, with an enrollment of about 1,000 students, is about 81% utilized based on MGT's capacity projections - within the ideal 85% range that allows for flexible scheduling and prevents overcrowding.

Chief of Operations Justin Robertson told the Times Free Press while touring the school that "the bones are good" at East Ridge, making it an ideal place for renovations, rather than a complete rebuild. The school's location in the growing East Ridge area would also allow it to take on more students who might be moved out of overcrowded schools like Howard or Tyner in the future.

Photo Gallery

East Ridge High School facilities



Barger Academy of Fine Arts - Built in 1954. Score: 54/100. Recommended to be torn down.

About 350 students attend Barger Academy. Most of them come from the surrounding neighborhoods in Brainerd. Most are students of color, many from low-income households.

The students at the district's only zoned fine arts magnet school have access to something that most of the 45,300 students in Hamilton County do not have access to every day: an art class.

Students at Barger attend a visual arts, music, dance or theater class every day of the week.

They play recorders or Orff instruments in Michael Mitchell's music class, located in a portable behind the school's main building.

They practice dance routines - or just shake out the wiggles - in the school's small dance studio, swaying across a floor covered in a dark pad. Dance teacher Felicion McMillion-Diakhaté stretches out the pad herself, working out the wrinkles and tapping it back to the floor. It's needed for safety, and the school can't afford a true dance floor.

Students act out skits or use puppets to perform in their very own black box theater, one of just a few in Chattanooga.

Amy Burton, the school's drama teacher, has taught at Barger for more than 20 years.

"This school and this program is amazing, and it's important to keep it going," Burton said. "It's unique. It's so unique you won't find another school like it in a 200-mile radius."

But the school is overcapacity at 115%, according to MGT.

Photo Gallery

Barger Academy facilities



Third grade classrooms fill some of the school's six portables and the music class makes due with another small portable. The building itself received a score of 48 out of 100. MGT identified the school as the worst elementary school facility in the district.

In classrooms, portable window units roar and drip. Teachers have to turn them off when it gets too hot in the winter, and even more often have to bring in fans to supplement the dismal cooling they provide in the summer. The windows lack blinds and students have to travel outside alone to portable classrooms.

Safety is a concern for Principal Roxanne Anthony, and school security is a top priority for the school district. Schools have increased security at front entrances and in parking lots, but at schools like Barger, often students have to move between separate buildings to get to class.

The school's cafeteria serves as a lunch room, a physical education classroom, a gym and its auditorium.

Barger's fine arts facilitator, Juana Wilson-Roberts, scoffs at the idea of a fine arts school without an auditorium.

The cafeteria manager has to put up and pull down sets of tables at least twice a day to make room for all the activities that might take place in the room in between breakfast and lunch.

Barger is slated to be closed, under MGT's preliminary recommendations. Its students would be rezoned to Woodmore and Bess T. Shepard elementary schools.

But school staff say no. They turned up at community meetings across the district to question MGT officials, to remind them about what happens inside Barger's walls.

Our teachers make do, Anthony said. They do a lot with a little.

"Breaking up the team we have here would crush me," Anthony said.

There is nowhere like Barger in Hamilton County, Anthony and Wilson-Roberts told the Times Free Press. We have the land, we have the site, we have the team that makes the school what it is. Build us a new school, they argue.

Mostly they ask, if Barger is torn down, what will happen to the neighborhood?

What will happen to the students?

Contact Meghan Mangrum at mmangrum@timesfreepress.com or [423-757-6592](tel:423-757-6592).

Follow her on Twitter @memangrum.

Meghan Mangrum

mmangrum@timesfreepress.com

Meghan Mangrum covers education for the Chattanooga Times Free Press. She joined the paper in November 2017. Previously, she worked as a digital producer for the USA TODAY Network in Florida, reported on education for Chalkbeat, and covered government, tourism and real estate for Miami Today. A Florida native, Meghan moved to Chattanooga in 2017. She attended graduate school at the University of Florida, where she managed undergraduate student journalists for WUFT News. There she led the award-winning multimedia project "Our Gainesville," as well as Electionland, an information verification effort during the 2016 presidential election organized by ProPublica. Meghan served with AmeriCorps from 2013 to 2015, working in high-needs schools in Orlando, Florida. She graduated from the University of South Florida with a journalism degree in 2013. Meghan enjoys yoga, kayaking and hanging out with her dogs, Sophie and George. You can contact her at mmangrum@timesfreepress.com or [423-757-6592](tel:423-757-6592).

Hamilton County community members react to facilities report at raucous meetings

December 15, 2019 by Meghan Mangrum | Updated December 23, 2019 at 3:45

p.m.



Editor's note: This is the second story in a three-part series taking a look at Hamilton County's school facilities. Read part one [here](#).

Daniel Rodriguez, a freshman at Chattanooga High Center for Creative Arts, held his arm up for nearly 30 minutes, waiting to be called on.

He was one of about 150 people filling the auditorium at Lookout Valley Middle/High School on Dec. 4 to hear about Hamilton County Schools' preliminary facilities report - a report unveiled in July, which has identified more than \$1.36 billion in capital needs across 74 district schools and made sweeping recommendations to renovate, rebuild and close facilities across the county.

Assessors with MGT Consulting, which prepared the report, walked every school and evaluated the physical conditions of the buildings and grounds, the suitability of existing classrooms and resources for the education programs the building is meant to provide, and the technology readiness of each building, according to Dan Schmidt, director of MGT's Education Consulting Group.

Among those ranked among the poor or unsatisfactory facilities in the report were 21 schools, including Rodriguez' school.

That night in the Lookout Valley auditorium, Rodriguez waited patiently with his little brother to share his piece. The adults talked over each other, often raising their voices or interrupting others as they questioned Schmidt.

When his turn came, Rodriguez asked: "Did you walk through [Chattanooga High School Center for Creative Arts] yourself? Did you know that Barger Academy is the only elementary school dedicated to performing arts in the district?"

His classmate, Madelyn Little, had her own concerns.

"It has been a home for years, it has been a place where we were meant to go to school," Little said.

The students are among dozens of people who have spoken out in recent weeks.

Teachers, parents and community members say they are concerned about how the recommendation to uproot students in neighborhood schools and move them into larger facilities can impact a child's education, but most of all they are concerned about who is being consulted and providing input to those who make these decisions.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

In July 2019, MGT Consulting Group unveiled a preliminary facilities report to the Hamilton County Commission and Board of Education that identified \$1.36 billion in deferred maintenance across 74 school facilities. The report recommended an \$855 million plan to renovate and rebuild facilities. The Times Free Press toured more than a dozen schools in December. Reporters and photographers talked with principals, school leaders and veteran teachers who know what takes place within the wall of these schools. We visited classrooms, playgrounds, sports facilities, cafeterias, even bathrooms. We also attended three of five community forums hosted by MGT across the district to gather input and feedback from the community about its initial recommendation. The following stories shares what we found and what we heard.-
Search by school: What the Hamilton County Schools' preliminary facilities report could mean for your school- Tell us what you think: What do you think are the biggest issues with Hamilton County Schools facilities?

'You simply cannot replace these facilities'

Colleen Laliberte's husband, Ray Laliberte, has taught at Chattanooga High School Center for Creative Arts for more than 30 years. He has been at the school since it became a magnet school in 1997, after it received a \$1 million federal grant through the Magnet School Assistance Program to establish the range of spaces the facility has to

run a successful fine arts school, including three dance studios, two orchestra band rooms, multiple visual arts labs, a piano lab, a black box theater and other facilities the school offers in addition to the typical classrooms found in a high school.

She spoke passionately at the facilities meeting at Lookout Valley about how community members, families and staff at the school have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years for the school. She wanted to know why would MGT recommend moving the school to the building that currently houses Dalewood Middle School.

"You simply cannot replace these facilities at Dalewood Middle School. You can't just say, 'We're just going to move you across town to Dalewood,' she said. "You have to do the research into this school that is an inspiration in this community and across the country."

Over two nights on Dec. 4 and 5, faculty from Barger Academy along with CCA staff and parents attended meetings at Lookout Valley and Dalewood and questioned the report, asking if assessors really analyzed how rooms were being used, what programs were provided and whether the \$855 million renovation plan included the types of renovations needed to replicate CCA's facilities at Dalewood.

Schmidt's short answer was no.

The full cost has not been factored into the \$855 million estimated plan, he said. It would have to be calculated and included in any building or renovation decisions made by the district and Hamilton County Schools in the future.

Photo Gallery

[Chattanooga Center for Creative Arts facilities](#)



'The reality is this is an enormous decision'

The report recommends closing both Lookout Valley and Lookout Mountain elementary schools and sending the combined 450 students to a newly renovated K-12 building at Lookout Valley Middle/High School.

Despite calling Lookout Mountain a beautiful campus, Schmidt said it isn't suitable for 21st century technology and both elementary schools are underutilized.

Many parents, both on the mountain and in the valley, say they are not comfortable sending their elementary-aged children to school with high-schoolers.

Others worry about the estimated 900-student population the K-12 school would serve, asking whether it is simply too large.

Chyela Rowe, the Arts in Healthcare Program coordinator at CHI Memorial, asked Schmidt if MGT has done research into what closing schools and uprooting students does to students success.

"The reality is this is an enormous decision that impacts the entire lives of these families," Rowe said. "Do you have data on the social-emotional impact of these type of changes?"



Staff Photo by Robin Rudd/ A sign on Browns Ferry Road near Interstate 24 supports keeping schools in Lookout Valley open. The sign was photographed on December 4, 2019.

Schmidt said that MGT has been doing this type of work all over the country for more than 40 years but does not have data on the impact on academic achievement or student well-being from districts where large-scale changes have been made.

Some predict that, were Lookout Mountain to close, parents would turn to local private or independent schools.

About 5,500 students zoned for a Hamilton County public school already attend a private or parochial school, but closing historical neighborhood schools or changing the programs offered at popular magnets could drive more families out of the public school system, some argue.

April Goebeler and her husband, Nick Goebeler, are worried about the effect that larger schools could have, especially on magnet programs that tout small class sizes like at Chattanooga School for the Arts and Sciences.

Both their daughters attended preschool at The Bright School, and now the oldest is in first grade at CSAS, but April Goebeler said they could have chosen alternative options, as well.

"I feel really good about our choice and the education they are getting at CSAS," she said. "You can't double the size of a school without changing something, though."

Photo Gallery

Lookout Valley public meeting



Where are the elected officials?

Though a smattering of senior school district leaders attended some the five community forums held Dec. 3-5 - including Chief of Staff Nakia Towns Edwards, then-Chief of Schools Justin Robertson and Director of Facilities Justin Witt - Superintendent Bryan Johnson only attended one.

All nine school board members attended at least one meeting, though.

Community members saw it as a lack of participation and were left wondering how and why the recommendations were made in the first place.

At the base of Lookout Mountain, former county commissioner for District 6, Joe Graham, is urging residents to call out elected officials and the school district for their

lack of participation in the community meetings.

"We are here fighting for our schools," Graham said at the Dec. 4 community forum in Lookout Valley.

He called on the dozens of meeting attendees that stayed well past the two-hour meeting's scheduled time to look around at who was in attendance.

"What you're saying here today is important, but most of the decision makers for our school system have already left before the discussion even started," Graham said.

"Wake up, we need to elect different people to run our school system."

But Johnson said MGT set the calendar for meetings, and on some nights, like Dec. 3, he was tied up in a meeting with Tennessee Education Commissioner Penny Schwinn, who was in town for a State Partnership Network advisory board meeting, but he did attend the meeting in Lookout Valley.

Board member Tiffanie Robinson, of District 4, also attended at least two meetings. At Lookout Valley, she addressed the crowd and pointed out that at least four school board members and a commissioner were in attendance.

"I wanted to let you know that you do have elected officials here and we are listening," she told the crowd. "And we are here because we want to hear your feedback. We don't know the answers yet, that's why we're having these meetings."

Smith, of District 3, said his counterpart, County Commissioner Greg Martin, also attended the Dec. 3 meeting at Hixson High, but there was poor turnout from the community. He said the board needs to have a bigger role in the next set of meetings.

"We need to have a bigger role with how this how information is rolled out to the community," Smith told the Times Free Press. "At this point when it's all said and done, the board will be the ones making those final recommendations and presenting it the county commission and the taxpayers."

A sign appeared recently on Browns Ferry Road near Interstate 24 that read "Don't let Jenny Hill & David Sharpe close our schools."

Graham, the incumbent, was defeated by David Sharpe in 2018 when Hill was also elected to the school board.

Graham argues neighborhood schools reflect and define their communities.

Others agree.

'What happens to the neighborhood?'

Along with changes to Lookout Valley and Lookout Mountain schools, the report also calls for relocating CSAS and Chattanooga School for the Liberal Arts to a new facility at Brainerd High School, dispersing Brainerd's mostly black student population to nearby schools like Tyner Academy and East Ridge, and moving CCA to Dalewood Middle School to create a "magnet corridor."

Dalewood Middle students would also be rezoned and bused out of their communities to schools like Orchard Knob Elementary and Tyner Middle School.

But Normal Park Museum Magnet, a zoned magnet school with "strong neighborhood ties," according to MGT officials, would be rebuilt so as to not remove it from the primary neighborhood.

That rankled Nicole McCamish during the Dec. 4 meeting, who asked why schools serving mostly minority students from low-income communities would be forced out of their schools while suburban, middle-class white schools remain.

Schmidt said a school's academic performance was not taken into account when conducting the audit and building the recommendation, but many of the more than 100 attendees at the Dec. 5 forum at Dalewood Middle School asked if the impact closing a school could have on a neighborhood was taken into consideration.

"Have you done any research into moving them from one neighborhood to another?" asked local activist Marie Mott. "Have you looked at, what if those will further segregate our inner city schools that are already segregated? What is your research into the history of closing schools in this community?"

Schmidt said those conversations were part of the purpose of the community forums.

"The history of segregation and the dynamics of closing schools is something we need to hear from you," he said.

Photo Gallery

Dalewood public meeting



Others say it's that type of community input that is lacking in the report.

MGT and the school district circulated a survey, walking participants through the report and asking a variety of questions.

But board member Jenny Hill and others, like Smith, have acknowledged that the level of community feedback at the first round of community meetings was not "up to the standards set by Hamilton County," she said.

Hill said she shares the "same frustration that the community feels" that more community members were not able to share their thoughts or have their questions answered about the facilities process.

Chris Ramsey, former president of the Brainerd High School Alumni Association, has urged his neighbors and community members to take the survey - and to provide solutions.

No one wants to pay more money, but no one wants their school to be closed, either, he said.

"Hamilton County cannot continue to operate with the number of schools that we have. With the cost of deferred maintenance that we have, that's not realistic," Ramsey said. "If you have in your mindset just to continue with business as usual, that's not going to work. Let's make sure to come up with some alternative solutions that we can put back into the equation."

Some of those solutions are already being discussed, whether casually at community forums like the one at Dalewood or among school leaders.

Sending Dalewood students to Brainerd and making it a K-12 school is one idea. Moving CSLA into a vacant building near the Northgate Mall is another, as is rebuilding Barger Academy on its current site.

But MGT's final recommendations are still up in the air, officials said.

Balancing students and Hamilton County taxpayers: School board says facilities talks are nowhere near finished

December 16, 2019 by Meghan Mangrum | Updated December 23, 2019 at 3:40

p.m.



Editor's note: This is the third story in a three-part series taking a look at Hamilton County school facilities. Read part one [here](#). Read part two [here](#).

Barger Academy of Fine Arts students were expecting a new floor in the school's dance studio - really just a classroom outfitted with floor-to-ceiling mirrors and a plastic dance pad.

But within 24 hours of the release of a preliminary facilities report to Hamilton County Schools leaders and the Hamilton County Commission in July, the private funder who had planned to donate the new flooring backed out. The report recommended closing the school.

"I don't blame them," Barger Principal Roxanne Anthony said.. "It's a big investment when the future is unknown."

Nearly a year after the Hamilton County school board hired MGT Consulting Group to audit all school facilities - something not all school board members agreed was necessary - the report is in: \$1.36 billion in backlogged maintenance across 74 school buildings.

But the 10-year capital plan the board charged Superintendent Bryan Johnson and his team with creating remains months, and perhaps even a year, away. Board member Jenny Hill, of District 6, is calling for a new community input process after MGT's "disappointing" take on community forums held earlier this month.

'When the water is low in the jungle'

Sandy Smith, a retired educator and long-time public education advocate and activist, sat in the front row of the Lookout Valley Middle/High School auditorium on Dec. 4 listening intently to Dan Schmidt, director of MGT's Education Consulting Group, as he tried to navigate the contentious crowd during the third community forum to discuss MGT's preliminary facilities plan earlier this month.

Smith waited patiently to share her thoughts as others debated how to fund improvements to the district's failing facilities.

"No one likes change," Smith said. "The most disheartening thing here tonight is not just that no one wants change, but that no one wants to pay for it."

Later, as she was leaving the meeting, Smith smiled halfheartedly when asked what she thought about the process so far.

"There's an old African proverb: 'When the water is low in the jungle, all the animals start looking at each other,'" Smith said. "We all have a vision, and when it comes to closing schools, we want to save ours first. No one's thinking about what's best for everyone."

Hill was one of at least three school board members in the audience that night.

She described the forums as disappointing, but she also acknowledged that MGT has done what the school district asked it to do.

"The work that MGT is doing is simply a report, it doesn't represent any formal plan for our facilities moving forward. At this point, it's 100% focused on our buildings and the suitability of our buildings for their programs," Hill said. "I am disappointed with what MGT considers community engagement. It certainly doesn't reflect the standard of engagement that we have set and expect in Hamilton County."

Photo Gallery

Barger Academy facilities



Building public support

Hill shared a proposal to create a citizen's panel, modeled after the 1999 facilities review chaired by architect Kurt Stagmaier, with her colleagues at the school board's annual retreat on Dec. 6-7.

A citizen's panel, she said, could explore funding streams and efforts that have worked in the past; it could look into mistakes made and how the district's facilities got into such bad shape, while helping restore trust and building support for the work by removing the politics.

"I believe to build public trust, the plan needs to include a lot of community voices," Hill said. "The common thread that I see is that people value community voice. People want to be heard. People want to be a part of the conversation and there is a friction between the desire for small schools and limiting the financial impact to taxpayers."

Board member Steve Highlander, of District 9, agreed.

He also said the forums have, so far, been disappointing. But he was wary of a citizen-appointed panel, especially one in which members were appointed by school board members and county commissioners.

"I think a citizen panel won't bring broad public support or perspective," Highlander said.

Hill doesn't know if the board or the commission will buy into her citizen's panel idea. The process could take another 12-18 months to formulate and adopt an official 10-year capital plan for the district, she cautions.

"This is me as an individual school board member advocating for this," Hill said. "If the community doesn't believe in it, then it won't be supported, but also if the county

commission doesn't believe in the plan and doesn't see it as a legitimate plan, then, understandably, they won't support it."

"This is ultimately a conversation about right-sizing our school system. We as a community have to determine the balance for what works best for Hamilton County students and Hamilton County taxpayers," she added.

Board member Tiffanie Robinson, of District 4, approved of Hill's idea, but argues that even if the district gets community support for a potential 10-year plan, there's still an even larger hurdle down the road: funding.

"I feel like the bigger problem that we have to solve is how do we get the funding to get this stuff done?" Robinson said.

And she is wary that there will be public support or appetite for another jab at increasing public funding after a contentious budget season and a 5-4 commission vote that shot down a request for a property tax rate increase for public schools this summer.

"I think the community is exhausted from having ideation sessions when nothing is happening. It's all emotional" Robinson said. "We also don't have a commitment of funding for all of these things; that I think is the big elephant in the room."

Hamilton County residents also recognize that change is on the horizon.

At another one of MGT's community forums, Chris Ramsey, former president of the Brainerd High School Alumni Association, urged his neighbors to join in and brainstorm possible solutions.

"Hamilton County cannot continue to operate with the number of schools that we have. With the cost of deferred maintenance that we have, that's not realistic," Ramsey said.

"If you have in your mindset just to continue with business as usual, that's not going to work. Let's make sure to come up with some alternative solutions that we can put back into the equation."

ABOUT THIS SERIES

In July 2019, MGT Consulting Group unveiled a preliminary facilities report to the Hamilton County Commission and Board of Education that identified \$1.36 billion in deferred maintenance across 74 school facilities. The report recommended an \$855 million plan to renovate and rebuild facilities. The Times Free Press toured more than a dozen schools in December. Reporters and photographers talked with principals, school leaders and veteran teachers who know what takes place within the wall of these schools. We visited classrooms, playgrounds, sports facilities, cafeterias, even bathrooms. We also attended three of five community forums hosted by MGT across the district to gather input and feedback from the community about its initial recommendation. The following stories shares what we found and what we heard.

Search by school: What the Hamilton County Schools' preliminary facilities report could mean for your school
Tell us what you think: What do you think are the biggest issues with Hamilton County Schools facilities

What's next?

In recent weeks, rezoning requests and talks on funding infrastructure have held up county commission meetings.

"I'm all for growth and I'm always for planning," said Commissioner Sabrena Smedley, of District 7, during a presentation about a potential new development in Ooltewah at the commission's Dec. 11 meeting. "We had a joint meeting with the Department of

Education the other evening and they talked about their five-year plan, and you know, we need to plan. I need to be able to answer the constituents in my district: What are we doing about schools? What are we doing about roads? What are we doing in the shorter term while we wait for the long-term fixes. I don't have any answers to that yet."

Mayor Jim Coppinger, who requested the initial budget that would have required a 34-cent property tax rate increase, said the county has "a lot of growing pains."

"One of the things we've got to fix is to have a better education system because people are moving to these areas because they perceive that is where their young people will get the best education," Coppinger said. "But when you start talking about 'We need more schools. We are going to add to the roads, add to the infrastructure' - all of this costs money. We've got some hard choices to make to move this county forward."

Johnson was noticeably absent from all but one of the community forums due to schedule conflicts, but all nine school board members attended at least one of the five meetings. Johnson said the executive director for each learning community was also present.

But Johnson said he anticipates "lots of facilities talk" in the coming months, both with his board and other local elected officials.

WHAT'S NEXT

The district will be tackling rezoning in the southeastern part of the county as the new Harrison Elementary and East Hamilton Middle schools open in 2021, Johnson said. And this spring, he hopes to present the board with a multiyear strategic budget that includes input from the community and takeaways from the final MGT report.

Regardless of what the final report from MGT says and what the recommendations are, school board Chairman Joe Wingate, of District 7, urges his fellow board members to come up with a plan.

"At the end of the day, MGT is going to leave us with cold, sterile data, and we're going to have to figure out a way to do something that works and gets more of the community on board," Wingate said.

The next round of community meetings is scheduled for Jan. 28-29. The final MGT facilities report is scheduled to be presented at a school board work session on March 3, two weeks before Johnson intends to present a proposed 2021-2023 strategic plan to the board.

School board member Joe Smith, of District 3, like Hill, anticipates that the process will not end with MGT's final report.

"At this point, when its all said and done, the [school] board will be the ones making those final recommendations and presenting it the county commission and the taxpayers," he said. "We have to be wise and move slow and get good feedback from the community."

Contact Meghan Mangrum at mmangrum@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6592.

Follow her on Twitter @memangrum.

Meghan Mangrum

mmangrum@timesfreepress.com

Meghan Mangrum covers education for the Chattanooga Times Free Press. She joined the paper in November 2017. Previously, she worked as a digital producer for the USA TODAY Network in Florida, reported on education for Chalkbeat, and

covered government, tourism and real estate for Miami Today. A Florida native, Meghan moved to Chattanooga in 2017. She attended graduate school at the University of Florida, where she managed undergraduate student journalists for WUFT News. There she led the award-winning multimedia project "Our Gainesville," as well as Electionland, an information verification effort during the 2016 presidential election organized by ProPublica. Meghan served with AmeriCorps from 2013 to 2015, working in high-needs schools in Orlando, Florida. She graduated from the University of South Florida with a journalism degree in 2013. Meghan enjoys yoga, kayaking and hanging out with her dogs, Sophie and George. You can contact her at mmangrum@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6592.