



Lee Fenton, a South Kitsap resident and a school facilities architect, gave an audience of community members an overview about long-range school facility planning and construction at South Kitsap School District's SK 360 forum on March 28. (Image from SKSD video)

SOUTH KITSAP SCHOOL DISTRICT

School architect reviews district's facilities needs, challenges

South Kitsap School District has invited residents to tour school facilities through April.



By Bob Smith

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PORT ORCHARD — Beginning Monday, April 16, community members will take part in a series of South Kitsap School District educational facility tours as district leaders seek input from residents participating in the SK 360 “School Facilities From Every Angle” forum.

Residents who register for the tours will get an opportunity to visit the district’s venerable school buildings, beginning with South Colby and Mullenix Ridge elementary schools at 9:30–11:15 a.m. April 16, and South Kitsap High School from 10:30 a.m. to noon later that day.

Tours will continue through April 26. The tour schedule and pre-registration page is [here](#).



A capacity audience at South Kitsap High’s auditorium March 28 took part in a forum organized by South Kitsap School District to provide community members an overview of the state of the district’s facilities and an opportunity to provide school leaders with input. (SKSD photo)

The SK 360 informational series started March 28 with an educational overview presentation at South Kitsap High School’s auditorium, which included experts on school finance and budgeting, construction funding, long-range facility planning, new school design and construction, and a review of the impact of the state Supreme Court’s McCleary decision and the state Legislature’s solution.

The Port Orchard Independent will provide readers with an overview of presentations given by school experts



over the next month. In this week's issue, a presentation about long-range facility planning, new school design and construction by Port Orchard community member and school architect Lee Fenton is outlined. His PDF slide presentation is [here](#). Click on this link for Fenton's [video presentation](#).

Lee Fenton, AIA of BLRB Architects

Fenton, a South Kitsap resident for 20 years and a school planner and architect for 30 years, told the forum participants that he moved his then-young family to the area after seeing South Kitsap's potential and community vibe.

He recalled that even in 1995, South Kitsap School District and the community was considering building a second high school.

"The idea of building a second high school and being involved in that and potentially having my kids go there was so exciting for me," he said.

"And it's fascinating to me that we're still talking about this. My kids have graduated from college, and my oldest is almost 30. We have a fascinating challenge in front of us as a South Kitsap community."

Fenton reminded that the school district has proposed construction measures to build a second high school five separate times. In some cases, those measures included building an elementary school along with a high school on property on Old Clifton Road. All measures failed to gain voters' approval.

In the aftermath of those defeats, he told the forum audience that the SK 360 series of community discussions is an effort to revisit the district's needs and overall facility plans, particularly as it relates to building a second high school.



“Maybe we need to explore that and take a look at how we want to spend our first [construction] dollars,” Fenton said.

“I think that might be a really important conversation in this community because we’ve gone zero for 5. Maybe that’s something we really need to address.”

He noted that South Kitsap High School is just one of many school buildings in the district’s “fleet” that need attention from the voters.

“You look at the percentage of the buildings that are tired and aging and eligible for [state match] funding, that is incredibly unusual,” he said.

An earlier presentation by Brian Sims, a state school funding expert, stated that just 17 percent of South Kitsap’s school buildings are less than 30 years old. The vast majority — 57 percent — are between 30 and 50 years old. The tiny sliver of good news about those percentages is that the state of Washington would assist the school district in paying for construction costs.

South Kitsap’s facilities needs are numerous. Fenton pointed to South Colby Elementary, which was built in the 1950s. He said the facility is too obsolete to be considered for expansion or renovation. Cedar Heights Middle School is another facility significantly past its prime, to say the least.

“Cedar Heights? No,” he said, prompting chuckles from the audience.

“It’s a facility that was built in a different era. We’re seeing districts invest smartly and not chase dollars. You’d be chasing dollars down a drain [by refurbishing Cedar Heights].”

The South Kitsap population, he conceded, is a tough sell in convincing them to spend their tax dollars on school facilities.



“One thing I’ve learned about being in Port Orchard is you need to make sure that the dollars you spend are smart dollars,” Fenton said.

“They need to not be focused on the latest and greatest, but the most solid, sustainable and long-lasting and durable facilities.”

A community member submitted a question, asking, “How often do other school districts remodel their schools?”

Fenton was quick to respond: “A lot more often than we do, I’ll tell you that.”

He said there’s a glut of school construction underway not only on the Kitsap Peninsula but throughout the state. South Kitsap missed a window to build a new second high school in 2016 ago by less than 40 votes. Two other votes — one as recently as February 2017 — failed to meet the 60 percent plus-one-vote threshold for passage.

“Right now, our new high school would be building foundations,” Fenton told the audience.

“We would be looking at walls being built in the late spring or early summer, and we would be opening the school in 2019. That’s what would be happening if we had gotten 30-odd more votes. That’s how close we were ... It would have been challenging in this market, but we would have done well.”

By contrast, Oregon’s school funding formula differs from that of Washington’s. Oregon school district voters pass their construction bond measures by reaching a 50 percent plus-one-vote margin.

The school architect said the challenge to fund new school buildings in the future remains elusive. “We have a lot to accomplish and a lot of work to do to get that next bond to pass.”



So, if the community and school district decides to proceed with another construction bond measure, how does it start the process?

“It starts with this community really owning it and wanting it and becoming involved — asking these questions, seeking answers, coming together. That’s what we have to do.”

Fenton said South Kitsap and its community needs to think critically about smartly designing new facilities that aren’t “over the top.” He said new construction plans need to be the “right fit” for the community.

The recent McCleary decision by the state Supreme Court and the resulting funding formula devised by the state Legislature to comply has opened the door to not only providing basic education but “excellent education so that our students are competitive and can be successful and win in this world,” Fenton said.

“And to do that, you need great facilities. And you need great teachers.”

Designs for school facilities will need to be student-centered, he added, and flexible and adaptable for the future. Plans also must be appropriate for contemporary learning, safe, operationally cost-efficient and be “inspiring healthy environments.”

Fenton was asked about what approach might be optimal for systematically addressing ongoing facility maintenance. He responded that, ideally, a robust maintenance and operations fund covers those costs. But the district hasn’t been able to set aside funds to address major capital facilities concerns.

“We don’t have that account set up for capital facilities because we as a community haven’t supported that. So we really need to take a hard look at ourselves and think about what that means and think about our aging



fleet.”

The architect said that despite inadequate funding for its school buildings, the district’s facilities and maintenance staff, along with the commitment of the school board and superintendent, has done an impressive job on a shoestring budget.

An audience member asked a question about new building construction costs: Why are cost projections so high?

“It’s the cost of doing business,” Fenton said. “It’s the economy. You’ve got to step up and answer the call if the need is there. If you decide not to, then that’s a decision you make as a community. But then you need to be real honest with yourselves and with the outcome of that.”

He said South Kitsap School District and others in the state use guidelines set by the Office of State Public Instruction with new school construction. For a new high school, Fenton said minimum standards call for 130 square feet per student. For a South Kitsap high school and its projected 1,800 students, that equals 234,000 square feet.

Construction costs from a chart the architect provided show cost per square foot averages ranging from \$290 for physical education and athletics to \$500 for performing arts spaces. Average costs for classrooms, administrative space and restrooms are about \$300.

He said those costs are higher than what it takes to build residential homes. A significant part of building a new facility — 45 to 50 percent of the costs — are what Fenton labeled as “project development costs”: architect and engineering design, permits, furnishings and equipment, telephone and data infrastructure, utility fees, and construction and project contingency fees. A portion of that is Washington state sales tax, which is 9.6 percent of the total construction cost.



Some voters last year and attendees at the forum asked: Why can't we see facility designs before a bond measure comes up for a vote?

Fenton said it's a cost issue. Architectural design work consists 6 to 8 percent of the total costs to design a building.

"Some districts front-fund that and come prepared when the bond passes," he said.

"They're shovel-ready. We're not in that place. We're behind. When we pass a bond or levy, we're not going to be ready for three years, and we've got to pay for that escalation."

Residents who take part in the tours this month will be able to provide input to school leaders about what they believe is missing from the South Kitsap School District's facilities roster — and what they can afford to build.



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