

W. Aurora may close schools

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AURORA - West Aurora school board members today will begin discussions about whether to close three schools and establish a gifted-student program in North Aurora.

The proposal to close Lincoln Elementary School in Aurora, Nicholson Elementary School in Montgomery, and the Todd Early Childhood Development Center in Aurora was part of the district's proposed master plan.

The proposed plan also included establishing a districtwide gifted program at both Fearn Elementary School and Jewel Middle School in North Aurora.

District architect Pat Callahan recently examined the condition of the district's 20 buildings, and today will present several options to board members as part of master plan discussions. Those options included converting Washington Middle School in Aurora into an elementary school and building a new middle school near the intersection of Prairie Street and Orchard Road in Aurora.

A new middle school would cost an estimated \$21 million, and residents would have to approve a building bond referendum.

The district already was considering a possible tax increase referendum to increase the district's operational rate. The district projected an almost \$1.9 million deficit for its 2006-07 fiscal year. Board members approved the budget in June.

The district recently asked residents to fill out an online survey to see whether they would support a tax increase referendum. Board members will discuss the results of the survey today.

The survey asked whether residents would support a 45- to 50-cent rate increase to maintain current programs and services. That would return the district's tax rate to where it was in 2001 and cost between \$150 and \$167 more per year in taxes per \$100,000 in home value, according to district officials.

Lincoln, Nicholson and Todd schools were among the oldest buildings in the district. Lincoln was built in 1892, Todd in 1934, and Nicholson in 1938.

"We need to be practical about our facilities," Superintendent James Rydland said. "They need to support a safe and secure environment, and support what we want to do."

School board members also will discuss whether to establish a gifted-student program at Fearn and Jewel schools. The program would serve all elementary and middle school students in the district. The plan would be to start the program by fall 2007.

"We want to make sure we are meeting their instructional needs and they are being challenged," Rydland said.

The West Aurora school board will meet at 5 p.m. today at the Administration Office, 80 S. River St., Aurora

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