

School Board Member Elisa Snelling Urges Parents to be a Part of the Process

Description



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Discussions about closing any Eagle River/ Schools are no longer being conducted in the Anchorage School District although local parents may need to be active in consideration of ASD boundary changes, according to Elisa Snelling, School Board Treasurer.

“We can take a look at our enrollment out here and see that we are not getting smaller as a community,” explained Snelling. “All the reductions are in Anchorage. We’re about 95.4 percent of our anticipated enrollment, which is about where we were last year.”

The start of kindergarten Aug 28 will likely also increase ER/Chugiak enrollment.

“The only thing we are going to be looking at in ER/Chugiak is our boundaries,” continued Snelling. “We are in the very early stages of discussion about this right now, but I will be making sure that gets aired out comprehensively among our residents. We need lots of opportunities for parents to be part of that conversation.”

For Snelling it’s personal: “I’ve got two children out there and I’m going to put on my parent hat for a night and weigh in. I see our Eagle River Valley schools at higher density—Eagle River High School is higher, too. We only have one phase of that building built but it is one of the highest performing schools in the district. Gruening MS is too.”

Boundary discussions will have an impact on northern ER/Chugiak schools: “...Fire Lake Chugiak, Mirror Lake, the northern part of Eagle River is where they are lighter and that may be where some adjustments will be proposed to shift the pressure from down here,” Snelling added.

The idea of closing schools with the statewide economic decline due to falling oil prices came up in 2015 when West Anchorage School Board member, Eric Croft brought it up based on the three top schools being considered for improvements: Inlet View Elementary, Central MS, and Gruening MS. According to an Alaska Dispatch News report, “Croft’s amendment to the school district’s proposed bond package said the board intends to study and have public conversations about potentially closing Central Middle School, Gruening Middle School and Inlet View Elementary School, which could save the district \$100 million.” www.adn.com/education/article/anchorage-school-bond-package-puts-rebuilding-facilities/2015/12/05/

By changing the formula for helping local districts pay for school construction, the Alaska Legislature has made any major reconstruction or replacement of schools prohibitively expensive. Croft pointed out in an ADN Commentary that ASD faces some challenges when it comes to expecting local taxpayers to pay for new or improved schools: "For many years, the state helped local Alaska cities construct schools by paying 60-70 percent of the cost of school construction bonds. Last year, the Legislature suspended this program until at least 2020. This means that for at least five years, the cost to the taxpayers of building and repairing schools has essentially tripled."

www.adn.com/commentary/article/anchorage-may-face-closure-some-schools-change-programs/2016/03/09/

Snelling is an accountant by trade; she is cognizant of these financial realities and their potential impact on Eagle River/Chugiak.

"Insofar as I have been on the board for just over two years now, that has given me a new opportunity to look over these numbers, examine these numbers, dig into these numbers and develop questions most people don't go into," she said. "It's challenging right now because I'm having to work with a budget that boards before me have passed and put into play. We are trying to direct much more money into the classrooms for the students."

Of course, a big driver of the costs are employee contracts; four have expired June 30. "We did just approve the Principal Association's contract. They have some 150 or so members including assistant principals. Charter School principals are not part of that association."

"My predecessor, Natasha Van Imhoff offered this advice to me: "This is a very big ship, and if you try to make it turn at the drop of a dime it will not do it." Making little course corrections over the years will result in gains one or two degrees leading to 10 degrees in five years!

On the campaign trail it was easy to say "I'm going to do this," or "I'm going to do that" and when you are elected you ask "why can't I do this," or "why can't I do that?" I have to work to make good changes as it is possible, and so far my most favorite vote has been to hire Dr. Deena Bishop as Superintendent!"

To her constituents in Eagle River/Chugiak, Snelling has this comment: "Our graduation rate did go up a couple of points, but this will be our first time of having the Peak Testing results of September from the testing in April. We are going to be doing Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing on grades 3-8. We don't want to over-test our children but we do want to know where we are and where we are going."

“The other thing I would continue to ask our community—and I will beat this drum all day long—is to urge participation in the process,” she continued. “I’ve seen decisions made at a board meeting because 20 parents rallied together and made a point to the board. Sometimes there are things we don’t see and emails or presentations at board meetings bring to light. Be a part of the process—elections do have consequences—people need to vote!”

Category

1. Uncategorized

Date Created

October 5, 2017

Author

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