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Women on a mission to improve area schools

Forest Oaks neighbors form a coalition to bring attention to overcrowded Southeast schools and to garner support from the school board for a bond referendum this year.

By Melanie DuVall Parsons
Forest Oaks Community Association

Overcrowded schools in the Southeast area and their rundown conditions have bothered Linda Welborn for several years. As a mother of two boys ages 9 and 6, she has seen first-hand the overcrowding at Alamance Elementary School, and heard from neighbors and friends about cramped conditions at Southeast Middle and High School. What really made her decide to do something about it, though, was when her neighbor's potential home buyers decided not to buy in Forest Oaks after touring Alamance Elementary. "They were very interested in the house when they went to check out the school. But they said, 'It's so run down, we don't want our kids to go there,'" she says. "After so many years, we had gotten numb to it. It was like a wake-up call to me."

It was a call she answered dutifully last November, when she joined forces with Cindy Farmer Wood, another mother of two Alamance students, and together they formed SEAC — the Southeast Educational Advancement Coalition.

The coalition's goal is to get money for improvements to area schools. When Linda heard that the school board was going to offer another school bond for 2007, she decided to do everything in her power to get the Southeast area on the bond. To do that, the coalition has to convince the school board that our schools have unmet needs. Seven speakers from SEAC spoke at a Guilford County School Board meeting on January 9. Along with Linda and

Cindy, Forest Oaks residents Chris Edmondson, Kylie Wood, Abby Wood, Kimberli Bullard and Jay Palen presented the group's concerns. "They did an excellent job of presenting to the school board that the Southeast needs capital improvements desperately," Linda says.

If the school board agrees, it will take the bond idea to county commissioners, who would decide whether to approve the bond. If county commissioners approve the bond, the next major hurdle would be getting citizens out to vote for it.

SEAC has made progress in a short amount of time. "We're getting recognition" from Guilford County School Board members, Linda says. "They are starting to listen to us as far as the needs of the Southeast."

The last time Guilford County voters approved a bond referendum — in 2003 for \$300 million — the money built six new schools, five replacement schools and renovated and expanded 17 other campuses.

But Southeast schools were left out of the equation.

"We're the oldest and largest school that has had no renovations," Linda says. "We have just gotten no money. The school board is in the process of defining their needs, and I want the Southeast [region] on their list, and I want our schools on that bond."

To better assess the schools' needs, Cindy walked through Alamance Elementary and Southeast High School and talked with their principals, who outlined their needs in detail.

The list of concerns is exhaustive and includes overcrowded classrooms, cafeterias, bathrooms, gyms and auditoriums; out-dated heating and air-conditioning; leaky plumbing and old electrical systems; and limited parking.

"These lists are the principals' lists," Cindy says. "They told me 'This is what we need and this is why we need it.' Our schools were built for half of the population that we have now."

Southeast Guilford High School was built in 1962 for 650 students. Today it's bursting with 1,311 students, 326 more than

the district's average for high school enrollments.

Four years ago, the district studied the needs of Southeast High School and pinpointed \$28 million worth of repairs. No capital improvements have been made since that study, however, and the cost of repairs, as well as the needs, have increased. Ten teachers at Southeast High are "floating" because there is no classroom space to accommodate them.

"These are needs that the school board is well aware of," Cindy says.

At Alamance Elementary, 879 students are enrolled, according to www.ncreportcard.org. The average number of students in schools with similar grade ranges in the district is 480; in the state, it's 494. In the higher grades at Alamance, there is one assistant per 130 students.

Enrollment at Southeast Middle School also exceeds district and state averages. The school houses 1,010 students, while the district average is 815; the state average is 674.

SEAC's mantra is "seeking adequate educational facilities for our children."

"We don't need anything fancy," Linda says. "We need maintenance. Give us good, solid schools."

You can help the cause by being proactive when you receive emails from Linda and Cindy. And pass the word along to your friends and acquaintances outside the neighborhood. "This does not just concern Forest Oaks," Linda says.