Meeting Notes – Oct. 3, 2023 -

The LaFayette Rotary Club held its weekly meeting on Tuesday, October 3, 2023. The club was honored to have Assistant Governor Paul Golden in attendance. AG Golden spoke a few words of encouragement to the club.

President Stephen Wheeler (pictured on the left) was responsible for the program and invited Superintendent of Chambers County Schools, Casey Chambley, as his guest. Supt. Chambley spoke on the recent court decision resulting in the consolidation of the two high schools, and the building of a new facility, located in Valley, AL. Supt. Chambley said he's learned as a leader you have to make decisions that negatively impact people you care about. He went on to say that it is hard to let go of traditions and customs, such as living on Eastern Standard Time. People are passionate when it involves their children and grandchildren and closing schools, he says, was hard. However, financially it was the prudent and responsible decision to make. He noted that the system had been working toward consolidation for more than 30 years.

The cost of building a new high school has doubled over the last four to five years. The cost of a new building runs between $400.00-$430.00 a square foot. A tax referendum to build a new school was attempted back in the 1990s and was voted down by the citizens of Chambers County. Currently the school system's debt service is low and property values and sales tax make the debt service manageable. The budget for the new high school is $95-97 million. Supt. Chambley originally wanted to borrow the money for the construction of the new high school months earlier when the interest rates were lower. However, due to the uncertainty of how the judge would rule, the board did not approve his borrowing at that time.

Supt. Chambley has acknowledged that the location of the new high school has been controversial. However, with the budget and funds that were available, he explained that the other options were just not viable. The board's first priority was/is to gain unitary status. Once unitary status is gained, the federal courts will no longer be involved in the decision making of the board of education, when it comes to the future of its schools. Under unitary status, the board must have the federal government's approval to close, build or merge schools. The federal judge made it clear to Supt. Chambley that it was Chambley's job to "fix it" with the money the board had available. All of the board's assets are owned by the state of Alabama and its citizens. He is unable to leverage any of the assets when borrowing money. He can only leverage against the tax money the school system receives. Without going to the citizens to ask for a tax increase, the board had to find a way to cut spending, in order to finance the new building. Spending cuts were made by closing schools and paying down existing debt service.

Architects are currently working on the schematic design of the new high school. The building will be 170,000-180,000 square feet and will be designed to serve 1,000-1,200 students. The first renderings are anticipated by the end of this month (October), along with the naming of a mascot. It's anticipated to take three months to design and develop the final rendering. Site preparation should take place in the spring of 2024 and bids should be let in March or April of 2024. They hope to break ground by late spring or early summer of 2024. The school is anticipated to open for the 2026-27 school year.

Supt. Chambley also spoke briefly about the food closet that Inspire Academy hopes to establish in the LaFayette area as a service project in conjunction with community partners. We hope to have a program about this in the future.

Diane Sherriff