

Published: Feb 26, 2006 12:30 AM
Modified: Feb 26, 2006 02:35 AM

Wake leaders balked at early fast-growth alert

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Don't blame Karan Bunn. She saw them coming.

As a school planner in 1992, Bunn warned county and school leaders that the number of Wake students would break the 100,000 mark in 2000 and reach 118,000 by 2005.

Her projections were met with disbelief, and her job was eliminated a year later.

"They didn't want to hear that at the time," said Bunn, who still lives and works in Raleigh. "They just said shoot the messenger."

Betty Lou Ward, a county commissioner, recalled the skepticism.

"Everyone took a step back and said, 'Are you really sure of that?'" said Ward, the only current commissioner who was in office then.

"A lot of people took it with apprehension because of the cost," she said. "My concern at the time was how in the world we were going to pay for it."



Olive Chapel Elementary School in Apex has 14 mobile classrooms to help accommodate the school's nearly 900 students. The school opened in 1997 with an enrollment of 474.

Staff Photo by Robert Willett

WHAT'S NEXT

School administrators might discuss their spending plans with the school board March 7. The board could approve a bond request in May; county commissioners could follow suit this summer before the bond issue appears on the November ballot.

But Bunn's numbers stood, and the Wake school system has been playing catch-up ever since.

By now, the consequences are obvious: Enrollment exceeds 120,000, and Wake is relying more than ever on classroom trailers to seat students. About 1,000 trailers -- 300 more than last year -- now crowd school grounds. And voters may see a bond referendum of more than \$1 billion on the November ballot, followed by a tax increase if it is approved.

Trace the missteps that led to this point, and a map of political realities emerges: an unwillingness to hear uncomfortable news, a reluctance to compromise, a running fight over money and taxes, a lack of communication and, simply, human error.

Enrollment projections were first discounted, then second-guessed. School leaders hurt their own cause with expensive plans and a reluctance to compromise. County leaders and voters often chose to do less than growth demanded. Anti-tax crusaders were so successful in keeping a lid on property taxes -- they helped defeat a \$650 million bond issue in 1999 -- that building new schools may now cost taxpayers more.

Here are the major areas in which things went wrong:

The projections

After Bunn's early projections were questioned, later estimates proved far less accurate.

Enrollment planners mistook a slowdown of growth about 2000 for a long-term trend. In 2000 and 2002, they projected 114,500 students by 2005 -- fewer than Bunn's long-ago projection of 118,000.

Oleh Wolowyna, a consultant who developed the model for forecasts after Bunn left, said he didn't expect as much migration to the county after the economy slowed several years ago. New private schools may also have slowed the growth in public schools, he said.

"The big surprise is the migration factor," Wolowyna said, citing a sudden increase in 2004.

County and school leaders blame the current classroom shortage on the faulty numbers, which failed to foresee the surging enrollments of the past two years. Bond measures passed easily in 2000 and 2003, but neither required a tax increase.

Tony Gurley, chairman of the Wake commissioners, said the current building program was intended to keep up with the enrollment growth that was predicted when voters approved the plan in October 2003.

"We're in this bind because of the growth that has occurred since 2003," Gurley said. "If you look at the \$550 million package approved in 2003, it should have met the capacity needs of the school system through next year, and it didn't."

Had the projections come closer to what has occurred, Gurley said, he would have supported a larger bond proposal and a tax increase to pay for it.

"I would have much rather raised taxes in my first year in office," he said.

But Wolowyna and school leaders say the problem goes back further than Gurley contends: Even as enrollment grew steadily through the 1990s -- as Wolowyna and Bunn had predicted -- school construction wasn't keeping pace.

"When you plan school construction, there is significant lead time," Wolowyna said. "Had the projections been acted upon, the crisis would have been much, much smaller. ..."

"The political reality is if you show politicians big numbers, they're reluctant to accept them," he said. "It means spending money, and they don't want to raise taxes."

The spending

The school board has always pushed for more construction money than the commissioners have been willing to ask voters to approve. The commissioners have been reluctant to raise the property tax rate to support the more ambitious plans of the school system.

And when the school system comes up short, school board members and commissioners tend to blame each other.

"The failed bond [proposal] in 1999 put us a few years behind," said board member Susan Parry. "In addition to that, the past couple of times we've approached the county, our proposal was greater than what was settled on."

Tax foes have been influential in trimming the school system's ambitions, and sometimes defeating them outright.

State Rep. Russell Capps, a Republican and president of the Wake County Taxpayers Association, campaigned against the 1999 school bond issue because it would have raised taxes. In 1993, the taxpayers association forced the board to cut a proposed \$600 million construction program in half.

"They could have built twice the number of schools if they had wanted," Capps said. "We're building far more expensively than we need to and getting fewer classrooms as a result. You just can't keep pouring money into the system. There's only so much money to go around."

He said he feels no responsibility for the county's school shortage or the prospect of higher costs for construction and property for schools than the county would have needed a few years ago.

"If they go too high, they're going to fail, and then there's really going to be some problems," he said.

County leaders say the school board doesn't give high priority to adding new classrooms, instead going after money for renovations and for noneducational facilities. The district has spent about half the money from the past two bond issues on renovations.

Even as the school system heads toward a record bond issue of more than \$1 billion this year, it has outlined a spending plan that included more than \$200 million for an administrative building and four regional maintenance and storage areas for school buses.

"Our major priority has to be capacity," Gurley said. "We can't be too concerned with the renovations. We've got to get the seats, then we can do all the other stuff later."

The land

Finding locations for new schools keeps getting tougher, especially in fast-growing suburbs, and money to buy land has been limited.

"Land purchase was always desired and pushed for," said Mike Burriss, Wake assistant superintendent for facilities, "but there wasn't a long-range plan to support it."

The county is littered with schools that have been swamped by the development that quickly followed their arrival.

Olive Chapel Elementary School in Apex opened in 1997 with 474 students. A year

later, the school had 850 students. Enrollment this year is just shy of 900, even after several new schools have been built to help ease the crunch. The school still has 14 trailers.

Burriss blames the school's predicament and others like it on a lack of coordination between the district and the county's municipalities. "I need to know where the growth is occurring," he said, "and to know how the school site is going to serve the county."

Lately, he said, that communication has improved.

"Everyone has realized that the amount of growth that is coming requires better planning," he said.

As available land becomes scarcer and more expensive, there's growing realization that the district needs to be buying land for schools farther into the future.

"The school system ought to be buying land more aggressively," said Bill Fletcher, a member of the Wake school board for a dozen years who retired last year. "It's been considered," he said. "It just hasn't been funded."

Trying to get it right

When Karan Bunn made her projections in 1992, she was predicting a dramatic shift in growth patterns, from about 1,400 students a year through the late 1980s to more than double that through the 1990s and beyond. A prospering local economy, she reasoned, was attracting increasing numbers of families from elsewhere with school-age children.

County and school leaders think that trend will continue.

"Nobody wants to miss the projections anymore," County Manager David Cooke said. "If anything, it's going to be on the high side."

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