

The Leopold Community Needs School Board Leadership
By Johnny Winston, Jr., Vice President of the Madison School Board

Aldo Leopold Elementary school is overcrowded and needs an immediate solution from the Madison School Board. School board members are elected by the community to make difficult decisions relative to fiscal and educational policy. Currently, the Leopold community is being played like a political football. Game over; it needs to stop now. Many school staff, parents, task force and community members are frustrated by lack of a solution. The Leopold community includes Fitchburg residents who pay school taxes just like the residents of the City of Madison, Shorewood Hills, Maple Bluff and the towns of Blooming Grove, Burke and Madison. But the Leopold community is being neglected and deserves better. I pledge to provide strong leadership in both the short and long-range plans for Leopold Elementary school and the affected communities.

Leopold's short-term solution would require the reconfiguring or an addition of the existing structure. A plan to add additional capacity at Leopold was validated by over thirty parents and community members who comprised the West/Memorial Area Task Force. For several months this group intensely studied boundaries, demographics and space concerns. The year prior to this, citizen members of the school board's Long Range Planning Committee came to a similar conclusion of additional capacity.

Building a new cafeteria and remodeling two existing areas would allow the school to function better and raise the student enrollment capacity from 655 students to 735. Currently, 678 students attend Leopold. The preliminary costs of this reconfiguration would be \$2.8 million. I made the motion recently to pursue different financing options rather than going to community referendum. While this would have an effect on our operating budget with a loan or lease purchase, it could change with the passage of a future building referendum that would allow the school district to finance the Leopold reconfiguration outside the revenue limits, and to refinance other past building additions throughout the district. This plan would give the district more flexibility under the state imposed revenue limits. It is anticipated that this short-term plan would work for Leopold for at least four years.

Short-term plans that move students are short sighted and extremely insensitive to building community with neighborhood schools. For several years, the Leopold community and their students have endured boundary changes and outposting. Clearly, the Leopold community wants to stay together. This desire is consistent with the belief that communities value and benefit from their schools. Whenever physically and fiscally possible, neighborhood schools should be the norm for this school district. This is the case for the Northside, Eastside, Isthmus, and Westside. Why should it be any different for the southern part of our district?

Given the belief in neighborhood schools, the long-term solution for the southern part of our district is the future building of another elementary school in the Leopold attendance area. The Fitchburg community is growing in the Swan Creek neighborhood and will soon see development in the Quarry Hill and McGaw Park neighborhoods. Over 1,000 elementary students are projected to be in the Leopold attendance area by 2011. I made the motion to direct administration to actively pursue possible land purchases in Fitchburg but regardless of where

that land purchase is made; there is no question that another elementary school will need to be built to accommodate students. Of course, this will require the passage of a building referendum.

As with anything related to the Madison school board, it will take at least four board members to decide the future direction of the school district, including Leopold Elementary. I have had conversations with Mayors Dave Cieslewicz and Tom Clauder, past and future school board members, task force participants, parents, teachers and staff. I have heard their suggestions, complaints and frustrations. The time is now for the Madison school board to provide the leadership necessary to solve Leopold Elementary School's current overcrowding and the welcomed challenges that growth brings.