

## **Working together could help Willmar Schools, special ed co-op make Middle School improvements**

A new gym and a facility for special needs students may be built on the south side of Willmar Middle School. It would be a coordinated project by Willmar Public Schools and the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative.

Written By: Linda Vanderwerf | Oct 26th 2019 - 6am.

**WILLMAR** — Talks about a Willmar Middle School addition that includes a regional special education program are continuing with a tentative location at the southeast side of the school.

Willmar Public Schools and the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative began talking last summer about the possibility of working together on an addition to meet both organizations' needs.

The school district wants to add middle school gym space and an area for an alternative learning center for middle school-aged children. The cooperative plans to develop a new facility for special education students with high needs.

Superintendent Jeff Holm told the Willmar School Board a week ago that the original idea of building on the school's west side is out because of the location of major utilities.

Talks are continuing, Holm said. The city's Public Works Department is participating in talks to discuss traffic solutions. It's likely that a parking lot entrance would line up with the traffic lights at Willmar Avenue and Fifth Street Southeast, he said.

While there are many details to be worked out, he said, "There's nothing at this point that would tell me we've hit a wall."

The school's general fund balance could be used to pay for the addition. Financial advisers have suggested the School Board spend that money on one-time expenses that benefit the district and not on recurring expenses.

The Middle School's current gym space doesn't provide enough physical education teaching space, Holm said in a recent interview.

The Middle School alternative learning center would allow the district to keep younger students in an age-appropriate program. The district's Area Learning Center located at Garfield School has students as old as 20 and works more with older teens.

The special education students to be served in the proposed facility are children who need Federal Level 4 services, meaning they need to be in a separate school program for all or most of the school day.

The cooperative operates Level 4 programs in its service area of 18 counties with more than 50 school districts. No single district has enough students to operate its own program, not even Willmar, so the co-op operates them, said Executive Director Cliff Carmody.

After a 2016 study, the co-op chose six communities in its service area for development of Level 4 facilities, Carmody said. The distribution of the sites should cut travel time for children to 30 minutes or less. Some kids currently ride a bus for an hour each morning and afternoon.

A new facility opened this fall in Montevideo. A former elementary school in Cosmos has been remodeled with the help of state bonding money.

In addition to Willmar, improved sites are planned for the Belview-Marshall area, Windom and Worthington.