

Provo schools ask city for help with low-income students

Genelle Pugmire - Daily Herald | Posted: Thursday, January 6, 2011 12:10 am

Provo School District has approximately 15,000 students on record, and nearly half of them -- 6,419 -- qualify for free and reduced school lunch programs.

Greg Hudnall, director of student services for the district, shared that and a number of other challenges facing the Provo District with the Provo Municipal Council at Tuesday's council meeting. Hudnall opened his remarks by presenting several bits of information in a presentation about the children and families the district serves. The Provo district is only one of three in the state that serves only one community.

"We are dealing with issues we've never dealt with before," Hudnall said. "Four of our schools qualify as highly impacted." He explained that means they meet criteria in four areas: students on free and reduced lunch, mobility (percentage of students who move between schools within the district), single parent families and total minority numbers.

"We see this as a challenge and want to rise to the occasion," Hudnall said.

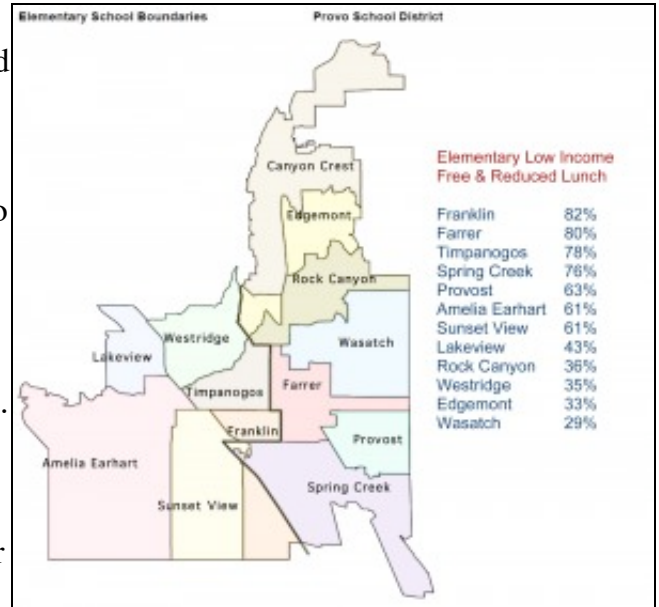
Councilwoman Sherrie Hall Everett asked Hudnall what kind of strategy the district is looking at.

"We've looked at this, and the No. 1 issue in the city is home ownership and families that stay long," Hudnall said. He noted that homes, particularly on the west side of Provo, are smaller, many in the 1,200 square foot range. "When families need a bigger space, they move to the Alpine or Nebo district. This is not a blame game, this is an acceptance game of what we are up against."

Mayor John Curtis says he's concerned about offending renters.

"What we want is stable people that give to their community," Curtis said. "Home ownership has been used as a gauge by some for years."

He said the important number isn't just the stability in ownership, but also having renters who stay for several years.



"They are just as stable," Curtis said.

With housing being a bottom line issue affecting the district, Hudnall said the challenge for the council is to focus on how to balance housing. As they address city ordinances, issues and changes in the community he asked them to consider unintended or unforeseen consequences.

Hudnall, who also is a former board member with the Provo Housing Authority, offered the idea that Provo is carrying the burden of a much higher number of low-income housing, thus affecting the school district. He feels other communities in the county aren't doing their fair share.

"That's what's on our back. We need to spread the wealth," he said. "There are 21 cities [in the county] -- why does Provo have to have 80 percent of the low-income housing?"

The Utah County Housing Authority, which manages low-income housing programs, but not in Provo, owns 130 apartments and duplexes throughout Utah County. The Provo Housing Authority owns 465 units and subsidizes 883 more.

Charlene MacKay, with Orem City said there are up to 400 rental vouchers for low-income people being used in Orem at any given time. There are also 65 vouchers for disabled people. The waiting list for vouchers is now closed because it had nearly 1,000 households on the list.

MacKay also noted that Habitat For Humanity has built a number of homes throughout Orem, and there are a number of specialty units in four complexes for special needs residents. Additionally, there are 82 units of affordable housing located throughout Orem, Lindon, Springville and Spanish Fork.

In reference to Provo having the larger low-income population, Doug Carlson of the Provo Housing Authority said that Provo is the service hub of the region and, therefore, has a concentration of social service facilities. Provo's population also facilitates better public transportation systems and the city has a regional hospital. These, in addition to being near two major universities and being a hub for county governmental services, make Provo a unique case.

"Provo is the urban center of the county, the county seat, and the service hub of the region," he said.

With regard to rental housing, Carlson said that some communities in Utah County have resisted, through their zoning ordinances, the development of rental housing.

"Does Provo have more than its fair share of rental housing?" Carlson said. "Perhaps, but it is largely because of its role as a regional urban hub and a college town that the ownership versus rental ratios are skewed."

According to Carlson, the characteristics of the "American Dream" are changing.

"We will continue to see higher housing densities and smaller dwellings," he said. "The affordability gap in housing, especially home ownership, will continue to grow."

He also said that demand for rentals will continue to grow, and families will stay in rentals longer. Renting versus owning will likely become a more attractive option.

"There was nothing shocking and nothing new in this presentation," said Councilman Steve Turley. "From

the research I've done these numbers are very typical of aging communities. The school district has done a great job stepping up." Turley referred to the upgrades in some of the district's schools and programs.

"Some simple strategies such as good landlord programs should be looked at," Hall Everett said. "If we have healthy neighborhoods they are less taxing on our city, there is less crime and need for social services."

As the new chairwoman for the Redevelopment Agency, Hall Everett said, "there are some people in the community that polarize this issue. I see a whole lot of middle ground to meet in. We know there's a problem. We need to ask what are the strategies that will help us. And that requires getting there and digging in."