



Growth staggers Northside

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Students continue to flock to already overflowing schools in the Northside Independent School District, pushing enrollment to record numbers and straining classroom resources.

Already the fifth-largest district in Texas, Northside school leaders are bracing for more than 100,000 students by 2012 and the growing pains they will bring.

"Real growth may very well be almost double what we projected," Stan Drezek, Northside's director of resource planning, told board trustees this week.

The growth is outpacing projections district officials made when they prepared to put a bond before voters in 2004, and they plan to tap voters again in 2007. If passed, the newest bond would fund construction costs for at least eight new elementary schools, a new middle school and a new high school.

The \$439 million bond passed in 2004 is funding construction of 11 new schools, land purchases for 12 additional schools and multiple classroom additions.

Officials don't yet have a specific dollar figure for the 2007 bond, but it could be bigger than the last one.

Drezek said San Antonio's growing economy and the availability of affordable land in Northwest Bexar County is fueling the growth.

"Very simply, every builder in the country is coming to San Antonio and coming to the Northside school district."

The district's dizzying growth has surpassed even liberal projections.

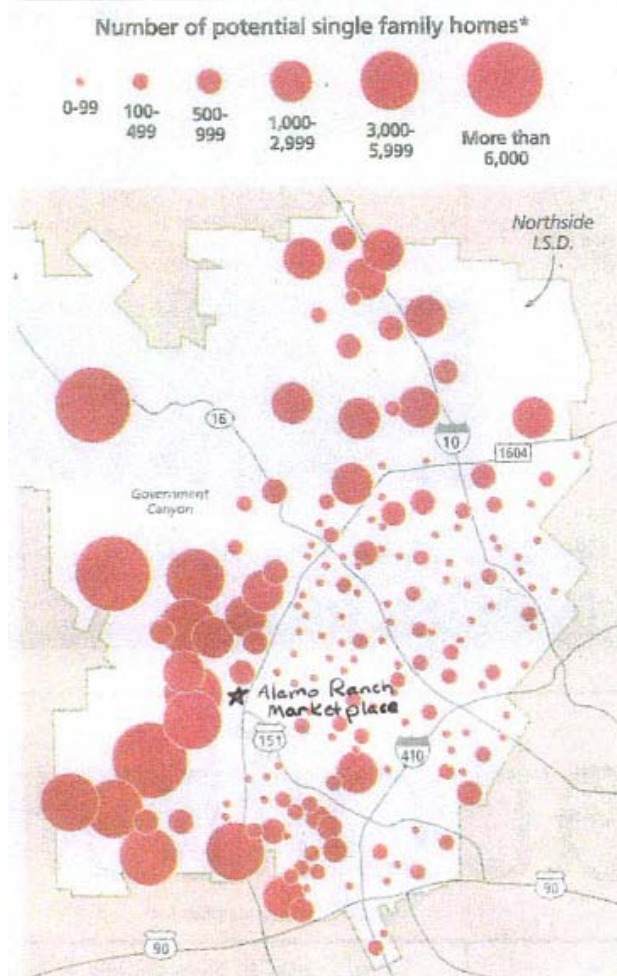
In preparation for the 2004 bond, district demographers warned there might be as many as 75,721 students in Northside by 2005 — an increase of more than 4,200 students from the 2003-04 school year. They were wrong. The real number: 78,104.

The newest projections have school leaders dumbfounded.

"We sat there ill at the growth that is projected in this school district," Superintendent John Folks said.

Future growth daunting

Vast potential for development is fueling growth projections in Northside Independent School District.



More than 5,700 families bought new homes in Northside last year and those numbers are expected to continue to grow. They don't include apartment complexes, which also can add to the student population.

The district is taking steps to manage the population explosion. They've capped enrollment at two middle schools — Stinson and Jordan. And all of the district's elementary schools are on a "cap and cluster" system.

Schools are capped at different grade levels, depending on their population. If a fifth-grade student moves into a neighborhood where the designated school is capped at his or her grade, the student is sent to the nearest designated cluster school. If that school is already full, the student is sent to the next nearest cluster school.

"We have about 1,000 students that take the bus to a cluster school," district spokesman Pascual Gonzalez said. "We don't have any other choice."

The board of trustees voted this week to retain a cap on how many foreign exchange students the district will host. Each high school is limited to six foreign students per year because of space issues.

Susan Johns, vice principal of Stinson Middle School, has watched the pasture and farm land of San Antonio's North Side turn into a vista of endless rooftops. She was a member of Stinson's original faculty when it opened 14 years ago.

"The only thing that was out here was Stinson Middle School," she said. "We could see horses grazing and cattle from our classrooms. That's all gone now."

Stinson is now bursting at the seams with 1,800 students. The school has six lunch periods — the first one starts just before 11 a.m. and the last one ends at 2 p.m. It's the only way administrators can fit all of the students into the cafeteria.

Johns said students also are barred from going to their lockers between classes. They can only stop by before or after school or before or after their lunch period. Even so, gridlock in the hallways is a daily occurrence.

"Our hallways are very, very congested," she said. "It makes supervision difficult. The kids outnumber us."

Board trustee Katie Reed said district leaders are going to have to plan ahead by buying land for new schools now.

"The longer we wait, the more it's going to cost us," she said.

Though Northside already dwarfs its neighbors as the largest school district in the county, it has the most potential for new development with acres of subdivisions under construction, neighborhoods in the planning stages, and raw land just waiting for the right developer.

Once the district is built out, Drezek estimates Northside will need 90 to 100 elementary schools, 28 middle schools and 15 high schools.

Folks said school construction is only the first challenge.

"We may be able to pass bond issues to build schools, but we're going to have to put teachers in those schools," Folks said. "And they'll need resources."