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Environmental impact of new Richland 2 school focus of Wednesday meeting

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Richland 2's Elementary School 20

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Richland 2 officials will meet with environmentalists, town of Arcadia Lakes representatives and members of the Cary Lake Homeowners Association to discuss final plans for Elementary School 20.

When: 4 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Richland 2 Conference Center, Columbia Place mall

Richland 2 is moving ahead with plans for a new elementary school near the intersection of Decker Boulevard and Trenholm Road, although Gills Creek Watershed Association officials and nearby property owners say they will scrutinize carefully the district's plans to assure there is no environmental harm.

Richland 2 officials set a 4 p.m. meeting Wednesday to discuss site plans and wetlands impacts with the association, the town of Arcadia Lakes and the Cary Lake Homeowners Association. The organizations have raised questions about the impact of building Elementary School 20 so close to the urban stream system and Cary Lake.

"So far it has been a positive working relationship," said Erich Miarka, program coordinator of the Gills Creek Watershed Association, a public-private partnership dedicated to restoring the watershed. "Wednesday is when we are going to get down to the nitty gritty."

The district closed on the 26-acre Trenholm Extension property Aug. 11, two weeks after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a permit that will allow the district to impact 1.24 acres of wetlands on the Trenholm Road Extension land, said Will Anderson, Richland 2's director of planning.

The district purchased the property from the Palmer Trust and will build the school at a cost of \$27.3 million.

The new 747-student school, set to open in August 2016, would ease overcrowding at three nearby elementary schools: Joseph A. Keels, Forest Lake and L.W. Conder. The schools are all more than 50 years old; Condor currently has 10 portables on its campus.

Almost immediately after word got out that the district was considering the site, environmentalists raised questions about wetlands preservation and potential sedimentation in Little Jackson Creek and Jackson Creek, which abut the property at its southern end.

"I feel like we have got their attention and I feel that we have a much more responsive administration with Debbie (Superintendent Debbie Hamm) there," said Arcadia Lakes Mayor Mark Huguley. "But we still need to see this through and make sure they do what is required."

The federal government requires permits to fill wetlands because the soggy depressions filter polluted stormwater, control flooding and provide wildlife habitat. Wetlands can slow the flow of sediment into open lakes or creeks. Wetlands permits are issued only after regulators review projects to determine if plans are acceptable. Disputes over the issuance of wetlands permits sometimes spark legal challenges.

"If there is any evidence that the disturbance is harming the wetlands, the stream or the downstream areas, Cary Lake in particular, we really want to hold their feet to the fire," Huguley said.

Richland County has long envisioned a network of urban trails in the same area to take advantage of the meandering stream system, although no significant progress has been made.

"This is an environmentally sensitive area and it is an area we are very interested in protecting," Miarka, of the Gills Creek Watershed, said. "We are very concerned with what goes on."

The association is a partnership made up of federal, state and local governments as well as local individuals and environmental groups.

Anderson said the district "will fill in those parts of the wetlands and reroute the water with the least amount of disturbance to those wetlands." As part of the mitigation process, the district purchased credits from a mitigation bank to offset, or compensate, for potential environmental damage on the property's wetlands.

Anderson said the district hired Palmetto Environmental Consulting Inc. to help the county wind its way through the 18-month Army Corps of Engineers permitting process.

Thompson Turner Construction won the construction contract and LSP3 Associates will be the architects on the school.

"All the companies that bid for this project knew we had wetlands issues," said Anderson, who noted that LSP3 has consulted with water quality professionals. The district plans to construct its own nature trail to take advantage of the location, said Jack Carter, the district's executive director of operations.

"We are planning to really do a lot of preservation," Carter said, including possibly locating learning laboratories near existing wetlands.

Huguley said the district has answered questions up to now and he expects the lines of communications to remain open. But he said the organizations plan to rely on that old adage "Trust but verify."

"It's our intention to monitor for discharge," Huguley said. "We want to know that they are actually doing what they say they will be doing and what they are required to be doing."

Anderson said construction likely would begin in spring 2015. New attendance lines for the school will probably be drawn sometime next summer and come before the school board in fall 2015.

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