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## Forum to evaluate trailers

### The school district will ask the public about the mobile classrooms

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Fourth-grade teacher Betsy Rice takes role outside of a mobile classroom used during all semesters at Derby Ridge Elementary School on Wednesday. Rice said she likes teaching in the trailers because it allows her to control the temperature of her classroom. (SHANE EPPING/ Missourian)

Thomas Jamieson-Lucy, decked out in the summer uniform of a baseball hat, T-shirt and shorts, talked about trailer classrooms with the same easygoing attitude that seemed to rule his summer afternoon.

"Sometimes (the trailers) would smell real bad because things would live under them," the seventh-grader at Smithton Middle School said, referring to a skunk who lived under one classroom trailer before its removal.

Thomas' mother, Jacui Jamieson, has no problem with the portable classrooms and said her daughter, Allison, a junior at Rock Bridge High School, enjoyed her time in them.

"My daughter was thrilled to get into a trailer," Jamieson said. "It had air conditioning and, at the time, the school she attended didn't have it in the main building."

Whether a skunk's home or a cool haven, trailer classrooms seem to be another part of a normal school day for students in Columbia's public schools. Last week, however, the Columbia Public School District announced it will hold forums Sept. 19 to ask the community through surveys and discussions whether to reduce the number of trailer classrooms or eliminate them entirely.

Adding trailers to a school accommodates individual classes, but existing support space such as restrooms, cafeterias and media centers can't handle the growth, thus making trailers an inadequate fix for a burgeoning school population, said Lynn Barnett, assistant superintendent for student support services.

Questions on trailer classrooms will be among a variety of topics, including drug and alcohol use, school structuring and technology. The information will be used to draft a district-wide facilities master plan, which will outline several small phases of expansion and construction spanning decades.

The district hired Dan Keck, a former St. Louis University professor who has worked with districts in school planning, to oversee the plan.

"Our school district is continuing to grow and all of our school buildings are continuing to grow older," Barnett said. "We want to make sure we are using the buildings we have most efficiently and decide where new schools need to be added."

Currently, Columbia schools use 152 trailers to house classes, after having as many as 176 in the 2001-02 academic year. The opening of Paxton-Keeley Elementary School as well as expansions at Oakland Middle School and Jefferson Junior High School resulted in a small reduction in the number of trailers.

By comparison, the Fort Zumwalt district near St. Louis, to which the Columbia district compares itself in size and other factors, has 10 trailer classrooms.

Much of the problem for the Columbia district stems from the large role MU plays, because it draws families with school-age children to the area but is exempt from property taxes. That means a relatively small tax base for a city this size, Keck said.

The district owns 90 trailers and leases the remainder from Missouri Equipment Leasing and Satellite Shelters. Chester Edwards, director of building services for the district, said that the trailers purchased most recently by the district cost \$35,000 each and that yearly leases cost around \$6,600.

No plans have been made to acquire additional trailers for the upcoming school year, but existing trailers may be shifted to accommodate needs.

Derby Ridge Elementary School currently uses 12 portable classrooms for fourth- and fifth-graders. Betsy Rice, a fourth-grade teacher there, likes teaching in them.

"In the main building, the teachers complain about being too hot or too cold because the temperature is controlled through a main system," said Rice, who is teaching summer school in her portable classroom. "But here in each trailer, we control the temperature."

Safety of students in the trailers during storms is a high priority for administrators, who watch closely for any severe weather warnings in the area, but Rice is confident students know what to do in emergency situations.

"The students know if there is a siren that goes off, we line up and head into the building," Rice said. "They know to walk quickly, but not run."

If the district decides to have fewer or no trailers, schools will need to be reorganized in a more efficient way, such as making junior high schools sixth through eighth grades and high schools ninth through 12th grades, Barnett said. Additions and new buildings are possibilities, too.

Despite concerns from administrators over the long-term usefulness of trailer classrooms, Jamieson, mother of the soon-to-be seventh-grader Thomas, shrugs off thoughts that they pose a threat to her children's educations.

"I think kids are adaptable and can adjust to a lot of things," Jamieson said. "Kids are tougher than people give them credit for."