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Southbridge pupils on the rise

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SOUTHBRIDGE— A demographic study shows the number of students in town schools could increase by the years 2015 through 2020, but much of that depends upon housing sales, new housing and a new school.

The study by the New England School Development Council of Marlboro was presented last night to the School Committee by Donald G. Kennedy, the leader of the team that did the study.

The school population is 2,295 and that is expected to continue to decrease through 2011, and then begin increasing. By 2015, the number of students could be as many as 2,650 students, according to projections.

Mr. Kennedy said that while the school population declines from students entering kindergarten to the number who graduate, the number retained would increase with a new school and new programs. He said figures from the Massachusetts Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Massachusetts were included in the study. While those figures are higher than those of the development council, he was of the opinion that the town could see population increases between the two projections.

The study included birth rates, the age of the population, the age of those having children, the number of children who enter school at age 5, and other statistics. For example, he said, the class of 2006 had a potential size of 296 students; 249 entered kindergarten; and now there are 105 in Grade 12. Mr. Kennedy said a new school and better programs would result in more students remaining in Southbridge schools.

The study also listed reasons why schools built for a certain number of students years ago can no longer serve the same number of students.

Mr. Kennedy said those reasons include space taken by new technology, separate rooms for science and music, rooms for special education students, and space for handicapped accessibility.

The School Building Committee meets at 6:30 tonight at Town Hall and is expected to decide which of two options it will recommend to solve space needs. Both options include a new junior-senior high school, but differ in reconfiguring lower grades. One option would require a second construction project to renovate the high school.

In other business, Charlton Street School Principal Bryant C. Montigny told the committee the school was one of nine selected in the country by the national Peace Partners Inc. as a Showcase School. The PeaceBuilders Award recognizes the school for its teaching students how to get along and be helpful to one another. The school, which began its participation in the program seven years ago, was congratulated by the committee.

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