



Springdale : Diocese plans grade school

BY JOHN KRUPA

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Catholic officials plan to interview candidates today to lead a proposed parochial elementary school in Springdale.

The school at St. Raphael Catholic Church could open as early as next August, said Chuck Marino, a deacon there.

"I can't say it's a definite," Marino said. "But if we are interviewing principals, I think that's a pretty good sign."

With 13,000 members, St. Raphael has the largest parish in Arkansas.

Church officials are drawing up a budget for the school. St. Raphael leaders plan to discuss the budget on Sept. 28. If approved, it would then be presented to St. Raphael's pastor, the Rev. John Antony, and diocese officials for approval.

"I would love to have it happen, I really would. I think a school adds a whole new dimension to the life of a parish community," Antony said. "A family without children seems to have something missing in it. It doesn't feel complete."

Northwest Arkansas already has two Catholic elementary schools: St. Joseph in Fayetteville and St. Vincent de Paul in Rogers. Both schools serve students from kindergarten to seventh grade.

The arrival of a third Catholic elementary school in Northwest Arkansas would be a significant step toward opening a Catholic high school in the region, officials said.

Marino said the St. Raphael school would open with kindergarten through third-grade pupils who all would be taught in the church's existing facilities. Parish planners would add one new grade each year up to the seventh grade.

New facilities would be built as necessary.

Marino said officials still need to determine whether tuition could be kept competitive with other area private schools.

A Catholic family pays \$3,210 per child annually to attend St. Joseph, according to that school's Web site. It costs a non-Catholic family \$4,500 per child.

Antony would like to see his parish subsidize the school's operations, as is the case with many Catholic schools.

Marino said parishioners already have pledged \$ 30, 000 to set up an endowment, and about 100 families said in a recent parish survey that their children would “definitely” attend a school at St. Raphael.

The opening of a third parochial elementary that could act as a feeder school bolsters the chance of launching a Catholic high school in Northwest Arkansas, Marino said.

The diocese owns 55 acres off Interstate 540 at Arkansas 264 in Lowell, where a Catholic high school could be built.

In December, the Most Rev. J. Peter Sartain, then-bishop of Little Rock, created a 15-member committee that’s been leading the charge for the new high school.

The group, which Marino heads, has toured Catholic high schools in the South, studying curricula offerings, enrollment trends, construction costs and revenue sources.

Sartain, however, was transferred to the Diocese of Joliet, Ill., in June. A decision on the high school remains on hold until Vatican officials install a new bishop for the Catholic Diocese of Little Rock.

Sartain was an advocate for a Catholic high school in Northwest Arkansas, Marino said. It’s impossible to know how the new bishop will feel about the venture, he said.

It’s also unclear when Pope Benedict XVI will install a new diocesan leader. Church officials said during Sartain’s departure that the replacement process usually takes one year. Such a timetable would delay the decision on a new high school that officials hoped to have by next spring. Vernell Bowen, superintendent of Arkansas’ 35 Catholic schools, has said that a decision on the school could come by next April. Bowen could not be reached for comment Wednesday. “We kind of gasped when he [Sartain] was reassigned,” Marino said. “We aren’t stopping what we are doing. We are still on schedule, but the key question is how long will it take for a new bishop to be assigned ?”

To contact this reporter: jkrupa@arkansasonline.com

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Contact: webmaster@nwanews.com