

South DeKalb elementary under way

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Truelove Park is losing three of its four softball fields, but rapidly developing south DeKalb County will gain a much-needed new elementary school.

Construction has begun for Oakvale Elementary, a 108,000-square-foot school on Oakvale Road near Panthersville Road.

Oakvale, which will be able to accommodate 925 students when it opens in early 2005, will provide the greatest relief to Cedar Grove Elementary, DeKalb's largest elementary school with 1,113 students.

"It's long overdue," said school board member Sarah Copelin-Wood, who represents the area.

When Zaheerah Shakir-Khan became principal in 1999, Cedar Grove had about 725 students, nearly 400 fewer than today.

"At least seven new subdivisions have opened up since I've been here," she said. "We still face overcrowding, so [students] are very anxious

and very excited" about the new school, Shakir-Khan said.

Cedar Grove once had classes in 17 trailers, but that has been reduced to 10 because a significant number of students spend most of the school day at nearby camps where there is more space.

About 210 fourth-graders are bused to Flat Shoals Elementary School for academic work in the morning and then return to Cedar Grove in the afternoon. Thirty Cedar Grove pre-kindergarten and special education students attend classes at Clifton Elementary School.

Cedar Grove fifth-grader Fadhil Moore, captain of the school's safety patrol, said the trips could be frustrating. Some students would act up, he said, and band students had to carry instruments back and forth because there was no place to keep them.

"I learned to deal with it," Fadhil said after writing his name in concrete during the Oakvale groundbreaking ceremony last week. "It's something about the kids having to

be on the bus all the time... I think [a new school] will really help."

Shakir-Khan said that if attendance zones are drawn wisely, Cedar Grove Elementary will have a reprieve from overcrowding for a couple of years after Oakvale opens.

"Growth and maximum class size affects teacher morale. It also affects parent support," she said. "When you try to meet the [individual] needs of 1,100 students, it's a challenge."

The \$12.4 million school, funded by special purpose

local option sales tax revenue, was designed by CDH Partners and is being built by a C.D. Moody Construction/Manhattan-Flagler Division joint venture. Some Cedar Grove High School students will get hands-on experience as interns on the project, said Stan Pritchett, the associate superintendent who oversees school system facilities.

The two Truelove softball fields that were on part of a 17-acre tract owned by the school system have been dismantled. Two other fields are on 22 acres owned by the

DeKalb County Parks and Recreation Department, but only one will remain there, said Marvin Billups, deputy director of the department. The county also will keep its playground there.

"This will become more of a park-school complex vs. a traditional neighborhood park," Billups said.

There are no plans for the county to build any fields there because the remaining land is in a flood plain, Billups said. In recent years, Truelove has been used primarily for tournaments.

KEITH HADLEY / Staff

DeKalb County School Board members (from left) Johnny E. Brown, Zepora Roberts, Simone Manning-Moon, Sarah Copelin-Wood, Elizabeth Andrews and Frances Edwards turn over soil at a groundbreaking for Oakvale Elementary.

