

## Polk School Board approves moving forward with proposal for high school in Poinciana



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Four years after the process began, the Polk County School Board has taken a decisive step toward the creation of a new high school in the Poinciana area, though its doors will not open before 2028.

The School Board voted unanimously at Tuesday's meeting to enter negotiations with [a private company to design and build the school](#). The school is intended to relieve overcrowding at existing high schools in fast-growing Northeast Polk County.

A committee had recommended accepting a proposal from Fortress Secured LLC as part of the public-private partnership process the district is using for the first time in planning a new school.

The district originally received an unsolicited bid from Building Tomorrow's Schools to build a new high school off Lake Hatchineha and Firetower roads. The district then issued an Invitation To Negotiate and received another proposal from Fortress Secured, for a site about a mile north. The latter company withdrew its submission in December, leaving Fortress Secured as the only remaining candidate.

Fortress Secured formed in 2019 and is based in Jacksonville, according to state records.

Polk Schools Superintendent Frederick Heid recommended accepting the proposal from Fortress Secured at the Jan. 14 School Board work session. A deadline has passed for any further offers.

The agenda packet for Tuesday's meeting included an analysis from an evaluation committee of the proposals from both Fortress Secured and Building Tomorrow's Schools. The committee rated Fortress higher in the categories of team experience; design, planning and construction; and estimated price.

The committee gave Fortress 6,689 out of 7,070 possible points in the evaluation, compared with 6,122 for BTS. Phase two of the evaluation included two in-person presentations from each team. The committee again gave Fortress a higher score.

The assessment included details from each company's best and final offers, with Fortress setting a total project cost of \$182.2 million and a construction timeline of 22 months. The company identified land-acquisition costs at \$10.08 million for 63 acres, or \$160,000 per acre.

### **Board members frustrated**

In its proposal, Fortress said that it would target 70 acres about a half mile east of Marigold Avenue on Bayberry Street, according to documents obtained from the district. The land would be purchased from K.K. Cattle Company LLC.

As of Tuesday's meeting, Heid said he did not know if Fortress had bought the land.

Building Tomorrow's Schools proposed building the school on property [off Firetower Road near Lake Hatchineha Road](#) and Marigold Avenue. That plan [drew opposition from nearby residents](#), as did an [earlier proposal to place](#) the school along Hatchineha Road.

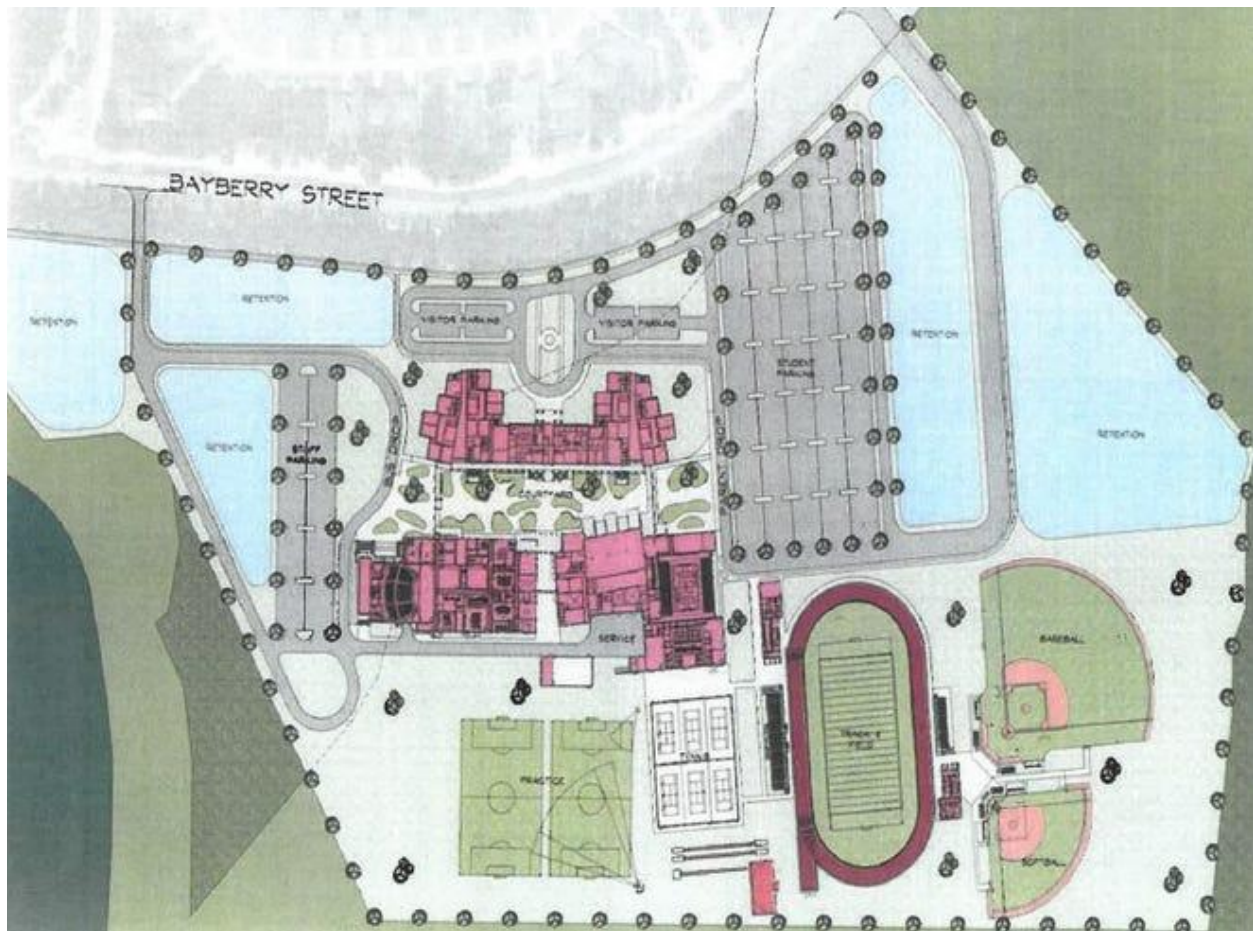
The School Board faced two choices in Tuesday's meeting: accept the recommendation from district staff to begin negotiations with Fortress or reject it and start over with a traditional "request for bid" process, rather than a public-private partnership.

In explaining their votes, School Board members William Allen and Kay Fields both cited Fortress' expected use of Rodda Construction as a selling point. Rodda Construction, a 36-year-old company based in Lakeland, has handled many projects for Florida Southern College and Polk State College.

Though they voted to approve moving forward with the Fortress proposal, some School Board members expressed misgivings and frustrations about the lengthy process.

“This has been a long journey — an extremely long journey for us,” Allen said during a work session before the meeting. “I’m going to just say I’m with you on this item, superintendent, and the work that’s been done. However, I’m not 100%. I still have some hesitancy.”

Allen recalled voting in 2021 for the acquisition of property, an action the school district never carried out. He said the vote called for purchasing the same two parcels now included in the Fortress proposal.



The price at the time was \$49,000 per acre for dry land and \$10,000 an acre for wetlands. He noted that the price Fortress quoted is \$160,000 per acre, with no discount for wetlands.

“That’s a problem to me, especially when we’re here to bring a sense of accountability to our financial conditions,” Allen said.

Heid, who was in his first weeks with the district at the time, acknowledged that the process has been marred by confusion. He said the delays and mistakes reflected the newness of the public-private partnership scheme rather than any intentional misdeeds.

## **'Desperate' need for school**

Heid and School Board members mentioned the departure of top district officials as a factor.

“Some of the delays were brought about because of a lack of transparency — and I'll leave it at that — that we felt in order for us to truly do our due diligence as information was being presented to us about certain things, that could impact our ultimate decision or the board's ultimate decision, and my ultimate recommendation to the board for procurement,” Heid said. “We had to do our due diligence, which meant that we had to get some assurances from everyone involved that there were no legal potential restrictions.”