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Easthampton high school project sees lower cost, more critics

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EASTHAMPTON - The Easthampton High School Building Committee got good news and bad news this week.

The good news: The projected cost of the new building - \$44 million - is less than the estimate of \$48 million presented in November.

The bad news: Neighbors of the high school are disgruntled about the plans. They say the project is too big for the lot it sits on and criticize the plan as not being "neighborhood friendly."

The committee Monday reviewed and approved architect Caolo & Bieniek's drawings, designs and cost estimates. This information is headed to the state, which is expected to foot the bill for nearly 62 percent of the project.

"We do feel that we've hit this pretty good," project manager Mel Overmeyer said of the \$44 million figure.

Organizers noted significant cost savings in not having to purchase new land for the building and not having to relocate students during construction. School will continue in the existing building while the new one is constructed 25 feet north of it. In addition, organizers said, the Massachusetts School Building Authority will likely reimburse demolition costs for the old building. Points will be added for state reimbursement for "building green" with environmentally friendly lighting, water use, energy and materials. School officials were pleased by the news.

"We said we're not going to build a Taj Mahal, but spend the least amount of money for the best project," said Michael Buehrle, chairman of the building committee.

City leaders now must educate the community about the coming debt exclusion override for the project, expected to be taken in May, which is to pay for the city's portion of the cost.

Abutters object

Meanwhile, neighbors expressed concerns about traffic, noise, privacy, lack of communication between the school building committee and abutters, and how quickly the project is moving forward.

The project "is not a neighborhood-friendly solution in keeping with the character of Easthampton as I perceive it," Rick Katsanos, of 76 Garfield Ave., wrote in an email to neighbors and the Gazette. "It appears the committee has been backed into a self-inflicted scheduling corner regarding the MSBA deadlines, which I fear is detrimental to the planning process, the relationship to many Easthampton citizens and the potential viability of the project implementation."

David and Jane Jones, of 80 Garfield Ave., noted they have invited the school building committee to visit their neighborhood to discuss the project from their point of view, but officials didn't come out. "I think it's unfortunate," said Jane Jones. "I'm all for a new high school, I just want this school to be put somewhere where there's enough supporting land around it. They're really squeezing a big building into a small space and it's going to impact not only the neighbors, but the students while the new

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one's being constructed and the older one gets demolished."

Residents echoed concerns about the building being too large for the site. Designed 27,000 square feet larger than the high school, the new building will be three stories tall where it is closest to Bryan Avenue, two stories on the library level and one floor where the cafeteria, gym, guidance and health suites, administrative offices and main entry are to be located.

"I feel like it is a monstrous building for our little neighborhood," said Barbara Curtis, of 56 Bryan Ave.

Overmeyer acknowledged the issue of location, saying it "has been a challenge all year long."

If approved by voters, the project's design work is expected to run from June 2010 to February 2011, with construction planned for 2011 to 2013.

The project will be presented to City Council Feb. 3 at 6 p.m. in White Brook Middle School and to the School Committee Feb. 11 at 7 p.m.

Discussions are also being planned at the Council on Aging and Enrichment Center, Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club.

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