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Easthampton panel OKs \$40M school proposal

By CATHERINE BAUM
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EASTHAMPTON - The Easthampton School Building Committee applauded its unanimous decision Monday night to propose to the state this week construction of a brand new high school at a cost of approximately \$39.8 million.

The vote was crucial, said Curtis Edgin, of architectural firm Caolo & Bieniek Associates, because it establishes the project strategy and direction.

"We have what they're looking for this week," Edgin said, referring to the Massachusetts School Building Authority, which is set to reimburse the city a minimum of 59.4 percent for the project. Demolition costs and costs for an energy-efficient building are subject to additional reimbursement.

If approved by the state, the new building project would require city voters to accept an estimated \$15.9 million debt exclusion vote in May.

The Massachusetts School Building Authority next month will officially weigh in on the conceptual proposal: A new school building on the existing site that allows for continued use of the existing building during construction. The proposal was one of five formerly on the table, including variations of renovation-and-addition projects.

Monday's selection was the only proposal that did not require relocating students during construction, which was seemingly the most important matter to committee members. Members said they did not want upperclassmen to remember their senior year of high school in a trailer.

"While it might cost \$1.3 million to relocate them, I don't think you can put a price tag on the impact that has on students," said Thomas Brown. "Where you have juniors and seniors that might not even know freshmen and sophomores, I think it becomes a dysfunctional student body."

What's more, the new building conceptual study, Edgin said, revealed cost savings unknown to the architect and committee coming into the project. Whereas variations of renovation-and-addition proposals indicated \$1.3 million to \$2.6 million in relocation expenses, the new building proposal essentially eliminates costs for 18 temporary classrooms, a temporary gymnasium for physical education and temporary guidance and administrative offices. The state won't reimburse the city for trailers and relocation costs.

The numbers

The estimated \$39.8 million figure is about \$5 million higher than the figure the architect presented to the committee last week because it includes demolition and contingency costs.

"What you saw last week was construction cost estimates. It's not the whole picture," Edgin said.

Meanwhile, the other two proposals increased by nearly \$10 million each with contingency costs. Edgin noted those project costs would likely increase with unknown relocation expenses.

Supporters of the brand new building said the proposal submitted is the best option with the longest life expectancy. Edgin noted there is also "more wiggle room" in designing an auditorium in the new building project because it's located near the border of the building in the proposal. The committee

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will seek public input in coming up with the schematic design this fall before the project goes to the authority for approval in January.

"The reality is you want to spend your money as smart as you can spend it," said Superintendent of Schools Deborah Carter. "You want to get the most for your kids."

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