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Easthampton panel set to OK \$34 million high school plan

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Monday, August 10, 2009

EASTHAMPTON - A brand new, \$34.3 million school is the choice of a clear majority on the Easthampton High School Building Committee, which Monday postponed a final vote on the proposal until next week so as to make some final adjustments to the architects' plans.

A new school building is the most expensive of five options laid out by project architect Caolo & Bieniek Associates Inc., and would require city voters to approve \$13.7 million in funding at a debt exclusion vote in May. The committee will make its official vote next Monday at 6:30 p.m. in the municipal building at 50 Payson Ave.

Formed in the late 1990s, the committee has advocated for state funding for a school building project for more than a decade.

"I've been doing this since 1998. It would be really wonderful if we could get this started," said committee Chairman Michael Buehrle. "It's been a long process, but it's coming to a good head. We're getting where we need to be."

The Massachusetts School Building Authority signed a contract with the city to reimburse the city a minimum of 59.4 percent, with up to 2 percent additional reimbursement for an energy-efficient "green" building and between 0 and 5 percent additional reimbursement for renovation costs.

Ten of the 13 people sitting on the committee Monday supported a new building, including former Easthampton High School principal Jeffrey Sealander, new principal Vito Perrone, Superintendent of Schools Deborah Carter, School Committee Chairman Thomas Brown, School Committee member LaDonna Crow and City Councilor Robert Harrison.

Proponents noted teacher requests at the project's public bond forums this summer for larger classrooms, which are said to support the instructional demands of the future. Frank Locker, an educational consultant hired by the project architect, told the School Committee and participants at the forums that larger spaces will be necessary as school buildings become more of a social necessity and a place to carry out group projects and art, science and laboratory work. Lesson content, Locker said, will be attained through virtual instruction, rather than in traditional text books.

"We hire more teachers that have been trained in innovative and project-based learning," Carter said. "You see that more and more."

Caolo & Bieniek is set to complete a feasibility study of the committee's top choice and submit it this month to the Massachusetts School Building Authority, which will vote on the study in September.

The authority is scheduled to weigh in on the final project - schematic design, project scope and budget - in January before city voters answer the ballot question in May. If it passes, the project would break ground six to eight months after the vote, according to Buehrle. It is expected to take 18 months to complete, according to Kenneth Jodrie, of Caolo & Bieniek.

Two options



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The architects will tweak and finalize two scenarios for the committee to choose from next week:

- a new school on the existing site that allows the old building to be used during construction of the new one; and
- a building with a new cafeteria, larger gymnasium, new auditorium to seat 350 people in an addition and a ground-level main entrance.

The second option is a combination of proposals made under "Option B," which was estimated to cost \$26.3 million.

Also to be tweaked on the new building proposal is the elimination of land acquisition. Jodrie proposed purchasing land, the Grygorcewicz property, at the end of Taft Avenue to move the building south. Mayor Michael A. Tautznik advised against the idea, saying the School Building Authority would likely not reimburse the acquisition, and noting that the measure would require City Council approval under a tight deadline. He also said the acquisition process "could be held up for significant amounts of time."

"Land acquisition's a pretty big deal," said Tautznik, who supports the second option combination of a renovation and addition.

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