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Easthampton school project advances

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EASTHAMPTON - People generally don't think "big deal" school-related meetings happen during the summer, school officials say. But this month the School Building Committee will make a pretty big decision, one that will establish the framework for the Easthampton High School building project.

Three options are on the table: a renovation and minor addition, a renovation and major addition, or an entirely new building.

The School Building Committee this month will submit its first and second choices to the Massachusetts School Building Authority, the final approval authority that is set to fund nearly 60 percent of the project.

It is likely the School Building Committee will make that decision at its Aug. 10 meeting at 6:30 p.m. in the municipal building, 50 Payson Avenue. School officials encourage the public to attend the meeting and voice their opinions.

"People need to know what's being debated," said Peter Gunn, of the School Committee. "I don't want Labor Day to roll around and then hear people suddenly say 'hey, how'd you get there?'"

He noted that School Committee members who are not on the School Building Authority will not be voting on the matter.

"I am just as much a citizen on this issue as anyone else; People are going to be voting on spending real money," Gunn said, referring to the May 2010 debt exclusion vote city residents will weigh in on to decide if they want to pay for the project.

It took eight years for the city and state to sign a school building project contract. But once the MSBA gives the OK to start, said Superintendent of Schools Deborah Carter, "the process is quick."

After the school building authority approved the project architect, Caolo & Bieniek Associates, this spring, the task list grew and the timeline tightened. The building feasibility study is due by the end of the month; design work is due in the late fall, and the building authority will vote on the project in January.

"It's like we're flying the airplane but we're still building the airplane," said Frank Locker, an education consultant hired by the project architect, Caolo & Bieniek Associates.

Three public bond forums were held last month to discuss the three project options. People supported a renovation and addition because it will likely be cheaper, while others supported a new building because that project will provide adequate space for 21st Century learning, according to school officials in attendance.

Locker, who facilitated the forums, predicts learning will be more active in the 21st Century. He envisions students learning a lot more online, and practicing what they learn through making projects in school. In fact, it's predicted by the year 2019 half of high school courses will be online, he added.

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"You come to school for social reasons, support, arts, group sessions, but you don't have to come to school anymore for content" Locker said.

"It may mean the traditional classroom isn't needed anymore. It may mean you need more spaces to make things."

About 30 people attended the forums, offering opinions on program needs and topics, including a new auditorium, media center and interconnected classrooms. For example, English and social studies classes linked to make a humanities program, with subjects like Middle English history tied to Middle English literature.

Meanwhile, Mayor Michael A. Tautznik acknowledged that summer is not a great time to seek public input, but said the decision at hand on whether to build a new building or renovate the existing building is more "technical".

"It's important that MSBA and the city agree, and MSBA is going to be driving the bus," Tautznik said. "We're going to try to convince MSBA that the right thing to do is 2X... it may not be the cheapest."

Of greater importance to the public, Tautznik said, is the building's interior design. Public workshops will be held in October and November for discussions about where the classrooms will be, how the building will be laid out and where the entrances will be.

"We want to make sure that the final design is clear to the public and that's that piece at the end," Tautznik said.

"None of us have any idea what this building's going to look like."

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