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Smith Voke to get state help with new building costs

By CATHERINE BAUM
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NORTHAMPTON - Mindful of the growing demand for locally grown organic foods and a fading large-scale dairy industry, Smith Vocational and Agricultural School is looking to develop a specialty in profitable and sustainable small-scale agriculture.

But the school's current laboratory, classroom and greenhouse facilities won't support the project.

To the rescue: A new science and agricultural building, about 75 percent of which is set to be reimbursed by the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

"We're just delighted," said Arthur Apostolou, superintendent of the Smith Vocational and Agricultural School.

Apostolou said it's not clear yet just how much the project will cost, or when construction might get under way, but this approval is a good first step.

Apostolou said he envisions the new building will pull together and localize all of the agricultural programs, replacing the existing agricultural complex, which includes a multi-species barn, pig barn and horticulture/forestry program.

Currently, agricultural programs are dispersed among five buildings throughout the campus, with equipment and materials in various storage facilities. In fact, the science laboratories on campus are located furthest away from the agricultural complex.

"This would consolidate," Apostolou said. "We want them together."

The school building authority voted to move this project forward Wednesday. Old and overcrowded, Smith Voke was one of nine vocational schools to make the cut for the Massachusetts School Building Authority Vocational Renew and Repair Program, set to provide \$100 million for improvements throughout the Bay State.

The state program seeks to update facilities in order to adequately train students for the jobs of tomorrow. It also rewards excellence in vocational schools, according to a memo written by Katherine Craven, executive director of the school building authority.

Among the list of excellence is the dropout rate at vocational and technical schools is now less than half the statewide average, and vocational and technical enrollment is up 15 percent over the last decade, even as statewide enrollment has fallen.

At Smith Voke, the agricultural programs - AgiMechanics/Animal Science and Horticultural/Forestry -

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Arthur Apostolou



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are at capacity. The 24-student program limit is sometimes exceeded, creating supervision difficulties, according to Apostolou. Another obstacle to efficient supervision is the complex's "L" structure. The building is composed of two former storage sheds that were moved and combined.

"It's not the best for supervision or the growth we know we can have," Apostolou said. "Supervision is just impossible."

Smith Vocational and Agricultural School houses the only large-scale agricultural program in western Massachusetts, including large animals and heavy equipment for major landscape instruction. The school also offers the only arboriculture program in the state with a forestry component that meets the needs of the western Massachusetts timber harvesting industry.

Other instructional areas that need improvement are the multi-species barn and pig barn, according to Apostolou. Students constructed the multi-species barn as a carpentry project and the pig barn is a former poultry house.

"The school building authority folks came out in April and they were impressed that even though we have old buildings we've maintained them very well," Apostolou said. "They look at it as if they're going to give us a lot of money, they want to make sure their investment is well-maintained."

The next step is a feasibility study to determine the "best possible educationally, fiscally sound solution" for the school, said Matt Donovan, chief of staff of the building authority. Apostolou anticipates the city will be asked to bond a portion of the project.

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