

School Notes: High school building project rising in cost

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EASTHAMPTON — While studies released this fall indicate a brand-new high school building will now cost \$48 million — roughly \$10 million more than the figure designers discussed in August — project supporters remind residents that if the city doesn't approve this project in May, building conditions will continue to worsen and the cost to construct a new building will be more expensive down the road.

"It's only going to go up," said Easthampton School Building Committee Chairman Michael Buehrle. "The thing that concerns me most is how can we possibly let our kids work in those facilities? We have the best teachers and course offerings, but you can't work in an environment that is terribly cold in the winter and insufferable in the summer."

Cracks, asbestos in pipes and poorly insulated windows are problematic in the current building, Buehrle said. He added he believes families who move to Easthampton would likely opt out of the school district through the School Choice program because of the high school building's physical unattractiveness.

"You can't blame them," Buehrle said. "That's our fault, it's the city's fault, so we have to correct this now or we're going to be in a worse mess."

A new high school was found to be a cheaper option than a renovation and addition project, largely due to the absence of contingency costs for relocating students and programs during the construction. School would resume in the current building while the new building undergoes construction. On the other hand, renovation and addition projects would cost more than \$3 million in relocation expenses.

Voters will weigh in on funding 40 percent or less of the estimated \$48 million new high school in a May or June Proposition 2½ debt exclusion vote. The notion is not new to residents here.

In the early 2000s, residents indicated in two surveys they supported improvements to the high school building. A 2001 school building needs study by architect Caolo & Beinek revealed the project would cost approximately \$35 million, Buehrle said, 62 percent of which would be reimbursed by the state. That project wasn't carried out because the state froze its school building program until 2007, he noted.

"It's been 6 or 7 years. Obviously things always cost more and there's no way to get across that," he said.

In 2005, voters passed a \$1.2 million Proposition 2½ debt exclusion override for the purchase of detailed school building and renovation plans. Approximately \$700,000 was used for the feasibility study of the high school project currently on the table. Another \$500,000 is set aside for elementary school projects.

"Lord knows when we're going to do an elementary school," Buehrle said.

One difference between the upcoming vote and the project considered seven years ago is that the state now reimburses the city as the project moves along, instead of waiting 20 years to reimburse project costs.

“It makes the process a whole lot easier,” Buehrle said.

College admission night

Easthampton High School will host a college admission night Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. in the high school cafeteria. Representatives from Westfield State College, Holyoke Community College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Springfield College and Smith College will be in attendance.

The night’s agenda includes a panel discussion regarding the college admission and selection process, followed by questions from the audience.

The event is open to the public. Light refreshments will be served.

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