

Erie district construction caught in state budget limbo

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The Erie School District is ready to build or renovate schools.

But with no federal or state money in hand to help pay for construction, "we've got shovel-ready projects but no shovels in the ground," Erie School Board Vice President Mary Frances Schenley said.

School directors and administrators are pressing state legislators to release \$20 million in federal stimulus money earmarked for the district so construction can begin.

The money is part of a federal stimulus package sent to the state for reallocation to local school districts. But Senate Republicans have proposed using \$700 million in stimulus money for state needs instead.

"The Legislature is trying to fill one gigantic financial pothole in the state budget and leave hundreds of smaller potholes across the commonwealth to be filled with local dollars," Erie schools Superintendent Jim Barker said. "We need to press the Legislature for the money intended for Erie schools."

School directors joined Barker in urging a full-court public press.

"Now is the time to make phone calls, write letters to the editor and contact state legislators," School Director John Harkins said.

"It would be a miscarriage of justice if the Senate votes to redirect funds intended to improve our schools and revitalize our neighborhoods," School Board President Gary Horton said.

District administrators and architect Bob Marz have recommended construction priorities at the board's request. Those priorities are:

- Construction of a new 88,000-square-foot Roosevelt School in place of the vacated middle school at West 23rd and Cranberry streets;
- Construction of a combined, 92,000-square-foot Wayne-Edison School on Edison property at 1921 East Lake Road.
- \$15 million in maintenance at other district schools.

Total cost of those projects is estimated at \$62.7 million.

Recommended for a second phase of construction are:

- A \$50 million science, technology, engineering and math, or S.T.E.M., school to replace Central Career and Technical School;
- And between \$25 million and \$38 million in renovations to Strong Vincent High School.

Phase I and II construction projects combined would cost between \$138 million and \$162 million.

Barker estimates that state and federal money would pay about 50 percent of construction costs. Erie taxpayers would pay the other 50 percent through bond issues.

School directors have not yet approved or amended construction plans.

It may be time to commit to all of those projects, Horton said.

"We would have half the cost paid for us and gain jobs in our neighborhoods and good schools for our kids," he said.

Still at issue besides which projects are priorities is whether Roosevelt School should be renovated rather than razed. Architects involved in a 2008 Preservation Pennsylvania study said the vacant and deteriorating school can be saved and brought to 21st century standards at a cost of \$12 million to \$15.5 million.

Cost to build a new school is estimated at \$23 million.

School directors expect to discuss construction projects further during a special board meeting June 29. They also will approve the district's 2009-10 budget, just one day short of mandated June 30 approval.

State legislators also are charged with finalizing a budget by June 30.

The Erie School District has more than federal stimulus money at risk in state budget deliberations. It's hoping for a \$2.9 million increase in its basic education subsidy, as proposed by Gov. Ed Rendell.

"Once we have a better idea of which way the state is going to go on the subsidy and stimulus money, we can make some solid decisions about our schools," Schenley said.