

BURLINGTON

# \$45m school construction plan advances

By Denise Dube  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Despite a soft economy and the threat of shrinking state reimbursements, Burlington's Board of Selectmen Monday, in a 4-to-1 vote, approved the School Committee's recommendation to bring a \$45 million school construction project to voters May 3.

If approved, Town Meeting would still have to vote to issue bonds to pay for the improvements, and members last year twice rejected a major portion of the project.

The question facing voters on May 3 will take the form of a \$45 million debt exclusion. The measure would exclude the cost of repaying the bonds from the restrictions of Proposition 2½, a 1980 state law that limits annual increases in property tax revenue to 2½ percent plus new construction.

The measure would renovate the empty Wildwood School, and renovate and expand the Memorial Elementary and Marshal Simonds Middle schools. Though the wording of the ballot question

hasn't been determined, School Committee vice chairwoman Christine Monaco said Wildwood would be used as a "townwide kindergarten facility."

At Town Meeting in May and June 2002, members voted on whether to issue \$10.6 million in bonds to renovate the Wildwood building as a kindergarten. Though a majority voted for the measure, it fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to issue bonds.

School Committee members said the renovations are needed to address overcrowding and poor conditions.

"Our elementary schools are just bursting at the seams," Monaco said in an interview.

Although Burlington High School has space to spare, most of the other schools are crowded, she said. Some classes hold between 24 and 25 students, according to Monaco.

At Fox Hill Elementary, two kindergarten classes share one large classroom separated only

Feb. 27, 2003

# \$45m school construction plan advances

► **BURLINGTON**  
*Continued from Page 1*

by bookcases. There are 22 children, a teacher, and an aide on each side of the bookcases. Monaco called the situation "chaotic."

"At Memorial School we have had to take away a music and computer room to make them into classrooms," said Monaco.

At Francis Wyman Elementary "we had to take a special education kindergarten out of their classroom and put them in a much smaller physical therapy room because we needed another kindergarten room," she said.

Worse still, Monaco said more apartments are being built in town, and some of those will house children. "We have no place to put the kids," she said.

But opponents see different options.

Kathy Boucher, a Precinct 6 Town Meeting member, said the Pine Glen Elementary School has an 18-1 student-teacher ratio, and that redistricting might be a better solution in the current economy and with reimbursements from the state's School Building Assistance Program in question.

The state this month announced that its building assistance program, which reimburses communities for part of their school construction costs, would not take any more applications until at least June 30.

Some residents during and after the meeting expressed resistance toward a debt exclusion, and cited the two failed attempts at Town Meeting.

Selectwoman Juliet Perdicchizzi, the one dissenting vote Monday, was vehemently opposed

**'To me, as a parent, it doesn't matter what the reimbursement is. If I have to pay higher taxes I have to pay higher taxes. What is important is my son.'**

LORIE GLANTZ, *parent*

to the timing and the request. She asked why the vote couldn't coincide with the regular April 5 election, instead of May 3, and questioned the additional \$13,000 it would cost taxpayers for a special vote.

John Lamb, a member of the Committee on Responsible Education, also opposed the debt exclusion and project. "We have to be prepared as if we would fund the entire project," he said of the uncertainty of reimbursements from the School Building Assistance Program. The criteria for reimbursement could change at any time, he said, and the amount could be reduced.

But Lorie Glantz, a parent in the audience at Town Hall, said she didn't care about the economy or any state reimbursements.

"To me, as a parent, it doesn't matter what the reimbursement is," she said. "If I have to pay high-

er taxes I have to pay higher taxes. What is important is my son."

According to Burlington's treasurer-collector, Brian Curtin, the \$45 million measure would increase property taxes for the average resident by as much as \$210 a year.

After last year's Town Meeting votes, the School Committee spent all summer looking at other options for Wildwood and the schools. Committee members came back this month with the \$45 million request.

"The School Committee still believes that the kindergarten option is the best for the town, both financially and educationally, to solve our elementary overcrowding," committee chairman Jack Lyons said in an earlier interview.

*Denise Dube can be reached at [dube@globe.com](mailto:dube@globe.com)*

# School rehab is placed on hold

Projects hard hit by state aid cuts

By Denise Dube  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

With Burlington unable to get state assistance for new school construction projects, town officials have shelved plans for a \$45 million, three-school renovation project.

The School Committee last week decided to rescind a request for a \$45 million debt exclusion for the project. On Monday, selectmen voted unanimously to confirm the School Committee's decision and cancel a May 3 townwide vote to approve the debt exclusion.

The \$45 million would have been used for creating a townwide kindergarten at the old Wildwood School for \$11 million, renovating and building an addition onto the Memorial Elementary School for \$11 million, and renovating the Marshall Simonds Middle School for \$17 million. The \$6 million remaining was contingency for inflation on construction projects, according to school officials.

The town had been counting on having 58 percent of the cost reimbursed by the state's School Building Assistance program. But on April 4, the School Committee learned that reimbursement wouldn't be available.

"It's a tough and sad situation," said Chris Monaco, committee vice chairwoman. If reimbursement is reinstated, Monaco said, the committee would try again.

"If reimbursement doesn't come back and we find out that it's not going to, we have to be prepared to take care of our schools on our own," she said.

In the meantime, the School Committee is already reconvening the Building Oversight Committee to look at alternatives.

The move to rescind the vote

SCHOOLS, Page 6

THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 2003

## Rehab plans put on hold

### ► SCHOOLS

Continued from Page 1

came after the town had already spent \$1.3 million last year on renovation designs for the Marshall Simonds and Wildwood projects.

"You get into these things and you want them to work, and then all of a sudden the governor, for the first time in over 50 years, stops the funding — just boom, stops. And you're faced with having two projects that are already designed and one that you are about to start, and all of a sudden the plug gets pulled," Monaco said.

Concerned with overcrowding and a need for renovations, the committee lobbied Town Meeting members for a \$10.6 million debt exclusion for the kindergarten center at last year's regular meeting in May and again at a Special Town Meeting in June.

Debt exclusions exempt debt-servicing costs from the restrictions of Proposition 2½, which limits annual increases in property tax revenue. They require two-thirds approval at Town Meeting. Both attempts failed by only a few votes at each meeting.

Had it passed, Monaco said, the State Building Assistance would have been locked into the 58 percent reimbursement, and the kindergarten center would have been ready to open in September 2003.

"That would have been one out of the three projects," she said.

After the Town Meeting defeats, School Committee members spent the summer looking at alternatives. They approached the selectmen and lobbied for the three-school proposal and a townwide vote. On Feb. 24, the selectmen granted that request and set May 3 for the debt-exclusion vote.

Although the May 3 vote has been canceled, the debt-exclusion article will still be on the warrant when Town Meeting starts May 12.

"We could go to Town Meeting and ask them for the \$45 million," Monaco said. "Even if we could, we wouldn't. It's just too much money."

The purpose of leaving the article on the warrant, Monaco said, is that "in case anything changes between now and Town Meeting, we have a basis for discussing the school project if we need to."

Reimbursement from the state is necessary, because the town doesn't have the money to cover the costs by itself, said Larry Rittenberg, assistant town administrator.

"If by some miracle, [the state School Building Assistance] changes its mind [about the reimbursement], Town Meeting can vote to approve it," Rittenberg said. "But there's no funding mechanism at this point. We don't have \$45 million to spend."

But, he added, Town Meeting members could amend the article, "saying, 'Let's just do the middle school,' for example."

John Cormier, a member of the Committee on Responsible Education, never supported the vote and was glad to see it rescinded. He said his committee saw the state's reimbursement drying up a long time ago. "The writing was on the wall," he said.

But Cormier said he sees the need for school improvements and that he would like to sit on the Building Oversight Committee as it looks at other options.

"Our current schools need renovations and need updating, so we know that there needs to be a certain influx of money into the building structures. We also feel that some of the older schools, such as Memorial, definitely need to be addressed," Cormier said.

"What can Burlington afford? How do we move forward with that?" he asked. "The options are essentially open at this point."

Denise Dube can be reached at [dube@globe.com](mailto:dube@globe.com).