



Sunday, February 16, 2003

Bay State hopes fewer designs will save millions in school costs

By Shawn Regan
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Massachusetts cities and towns will spend approximately \$58 million designing new schools this year and another \$60 million next year, but a plan being touted by the state inspector general to create prototype school designs could shave tens of millions off those projections.

Three or more basic designs would be developed through a competition conducted by education and architectural leaders. With some allowance for variations to allow schools to look different, the prototypes would serve as templates for every public school built with state assistance, saving the cost of separate architectural plans.

"We feel we can reduce what the state pays for school designs by about 90 percent," said Inspector General Gregory W. Sullivan, who has recommended the idea to Gov. Mitt Romney and the state Department of Education. "Given the state's severe fiscal crisis, we're hopeful it will be given a real chance."

Sullivan said the prototype proposal is a response to the state's budget crisis and a growing trend of excessively designed schools. Architectural firms charge about 10 percent of construction costs to design schools. With almost \$1.2 billion earmarked to build new schools in the next two years, reducing design costs could save untold millions, the inspector general said.

The prototypes, he said, would also lead to faster design approval by state officials and ensure that all new schools meet design and technology standards.

"We're not going so far as to say one size fits all," Sullivan said. "Schools would have a limited choice with the ability to make some modifications. ... The same architectural design can have a vastly different look by making a relatively inexpensive change to the facade or some other part of the

outside."

To have an immediate impact on the state's budget shortfall -- expected to reach \$3 billion next year -- Sullivan said the prototypes would have to be applied to all proposed new schools, including some of those already on the School Building Assistance Bureau's list of 329 projects approved for state money but not yet funded.

He noted that other states such as Texas and North Carolina, and cities like Philadelphia and New York, are already using school prototypes to save money.

Romney spokeswoman Shawn Feddeman said the governor is intrigued by the idea, but he will not comment on it until he presents his 2004 budget on Feb. 26. A Department of Education spokeswoman said state education officials are reviewing the proposal.

Critics of prototypes say the hard and uneven New England topography would make it difficult to implement. They also worry that it would lead to "cookie-cutter" schools lacking character and the ability to match their surroundings.

Not surprising, Sullivan said, architects are "screaming bloody murder" and promising to fight the plan.

Richard Fitzgerald, director of the Boston Society of Architects, said prototype school designs would be bad for students, teachers and cities and towns.

"Prototypes assume all schools should be built the same way, that children learn the same way, and teachers teach the same way," he said.

Architectural firms typically charge about 10 percent of the construction price to design a school, with the state picking up about 65 percent of the cost on average and the municipality paying the remainder.

This year, the state's school construction budget is \$383 million, with local communities paying an estimated \$197 million for a total of \$580 million, according to figures provided by the inspector general's office, a state watchdog agency with a broad mandate to prevent and detect fraud, waste and abuse in government.

Next year's budgeted state portion is \$410 million, with local communities paying \$190 million for a total of \$600 million.

A large portion of recently spent school design money came from Essex County taxpayers. The new \$110 million Lawrence High School, the largest and most expensive school building project in state history, cost just under \$10 million to design. Construction of the 565,000-square-foot school is scheduled to begin this summer, with the state promising to eventually reimburse the city 100 percent of the cost.

Blueprints for three Lawrence elementary schools built in the last two years cost almost \$8 million.

The new North Andover High, under construction off Route 125, cost about \$5 million to design, and an elementary school that opened three years ago cost almost \$1 million to draw up. Architectural plans for a new elementary and middle school campus opened this past summer in Andover cost about \$2.5 million, and plans for the just-opened new high school in Newburyport cost roughly \$3.5 million.

Louis P. Minicucci Jr., chairman of the North Andover High School Building Committee, said he does not like the idea of prototypes.

"You'll end up with a bunch of generic-looking schools -- like what McDonald's did for restaurants," he predicted. "No two schools systems that are alike, and in my opinion, it's important to tailor a school to the needs and character of the community. "

Sullivan said the idea was spurred by a growing list of excessively designed schools. One particularly egregious example of an "outlandish" design, he said, was a school district that recently spent \$800,000 to match the exposed metal in a newly constructed school to the color of a favorite dress belonging to a member of the school building committee.

He also said many school building committees are bullied or tricked into spending more than they want to by architectural firms.

"These school building committee's are voluntary boards of well-intentioned people," Sullivan said. "But often they are no match for private entrepreneurial companies that do whatever they can to exploit plans that do not spell out exactly what is wanted. Anything not spelled out in the plans, but that is desired, is then incorporated into the project as an "add-on" at additional cost, he said.

Wayne Capolupo, chairman of the Lawrence School Building

Committee and president of SPS New England, one of the region's largest contractors, said he believes prototypes could be used effectively in central and western parts of the state, but not locally where the topography is unsuitable to generic designs.

"The best use of a prototype would be for a small school district that wanted to build a small vanilla school on a good piece of flat land," he said. "In that instance, you could use a prototype and end up with a highly functional school at a highly reasonable price."

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