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School expansion plan withdrawn

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ROWLEY — Facing certain rejection by the state's school building reimbursement program, school leaders say they will not move forward with plans for a \$20 million expansion and renovation of the Pine Grove Elementary School.

As a result, the school department has also withdrawn its request to fund the first step of this proposal through a debt exclusion vote at town meeting this spring — after months of lobbying town officials to let them do just that.

School leaders expect the current student population at the Pine Grove to grow by almost 130 students, or 20 percent, in the next eight years. They've presented plans for the enlargement of the building to meet this anticipated need.

However, threats of budget cuts to the state School Building Assistance Bureau (SBAB) have derailed efforts to get the building project past the conceptual stage. According to Triton School Superintendent Garry Murphy, the word from state officials is Rowley's

application would be dead on arrival.

"(The SBAB) has been directed to only approve urgent projects," Murphy told the Board of Selectmen last night. "There's no question the message was we don't qualify as urgent. We will not ask for a warrant article and override vote this May."

Murphy's announcement to postpone any immediate action on the Pine Grove's expansion marked a full reversal from just six months ago.

In September, Selectmen rejected Murphy's request to hold a special town election following an already-scheduled Nov. 18 special town meeting. The school department wanted to ask voters to pass a Proposition 2 1/2 override to cover an estimated \$350,000 needed for "schematic design" plans for the project.

But voters had rejected a proposed \$4.6 million public safety building by a 2:1 margin at a special election just the week before, and Selectmen said this "message from the townspeople" was clear indication that voters would not support any overrides.

At the time, school officials

argued that delaying a vote would jeopardize the project, because they would no longer have enough time to get their proposal onto the state's school building reimbursement "priority list" for this fiscal year.

The list for reimbursements had a seven-year wait, Murphy said in September, and the Pine Grove project would likely be delayed for at least a year if it missed the application deadline June 30.

Now the landscape has changed completely, Murphy said last night. "The wait is so long now — probably nine years into the teens — because of problems with the state budget."

"If (a local override) passed, with \$450,000 spent on drawings, from what I know now I think it would be quite wasteful," Murphy said, as the project would likely not be approved by the state.

"We're probably 463rd on the list. It would be years and years until there'd be reimbursement for Rowley."

Still, Murphy said, the same "equity issues" that helped justify the Pine Grove expansion in the first place are still unresolved. In addition to the expected spike in

student population, school leaders say aspects of the school are under par compared with other schools in the district.

Some of the proposed changes to the building include a new library/media center, new auditorium, five additional classrooms and new science, music, visual arts and computer classrooms. The building's infrastructure was slated to be replaced with new heating, plumbing and electrical systems.

Murphy said last night school officials had debated asking for a debt exclusion for some amount of money this spring — "\$1 million, \$2 million, \$3 million" — to address these inequities immediately.

"It's a good concept, but it requires us to get together to see what we really want to do, what we want to go forward with now," he said. "We decided it was too rushed, and we need time to look at and outline our specific requests."

Murphy said school officials, working with the Board of Selectmen, the Finance Committee, the Pine Grove building committee and the school committee, may have a plan in place in time for a special town meeting this fall.