

School Department mulls options for renovating Reading High

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Proposals includes measures to correct gender inequities in athletic facilities

An architect hired to develop feasibility plans for renovating Reading Memorial High School has recommended a \$35 to \$40 million plan that includes enlarged classrooms, inter-building links and a new girls locker room.

Gene Raymond, an architect with the firm Strelakovsky & Hoyt, told the School Committee last week that safety and gender parity issues would be covered under his recommended plan and that building a new school is unnecessary.

Raymond presented the School Committee with six options ranging from mere administrative changes to building the new school. The plans are all based on a future enrollment of about 1,600 students, a figure projected by the New England School Development Council for 2009. Currently, Reading

High houses just under 1,100 students.

While the total cost of the project could top \$40 million, Raymond said the project is eligible for up to 66 percent reimbursement by the state School Building Assistance Bureau (SBAB). The town's share of the cost is approximately \$16 million.

One of the key elements of the plan is upgrading the Hawkes Field House to include a girls locker room and a link to the main high school building.

Raymond said the current locker room situation, which forces girls to travel to the field house after changing into their gym attire, is "untenable."

School Committee member Timothy Twomey, who is also on the School Building Committee, requested a legal reading on all of the options in respect to Title IX, a federal law that requires

parity for boys and girls in facilities and programs.

The link between the school and the Hawkes Field House could be eliminated to shave about \$2.5 million from the cost of the project, but Raymond said he does not recommend doing so.

"There are currently spaces within the building that are not on a traffic path. This could be a safety concern," he said.

The cheapest plan, one consisting only of administrative changes, would not be eligible for reimbursement from the SBAB because it does not address educational and program deficiencies within the building, Raymond said. The plan he recommends could be done phases, creating a minimum of disruption to the school's activities.

The cost of building a new school would go even higher than \$16 million

when demolition and site preparation costs are factored into the project, Twomey said. He noted that would be an increase to the town of about 33 percent over the option recommended by Raymond.

Russell Graham, chairman of the School Building Committee, encouraged the School Committee to reach a decision quickly on which option it intends to pursue.

"The data is before you to make a decision — either to build or renovate," he said.

Graham said keeping the option of constructing a new high school on the table could cause confusion in the community and lead to allegations that the School Committee is considering a plan that is not cost effective.

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The School Committee was wary of dismissing any of the options until counsel had a chance to evaluate them in light of Title IX and until they had a better grasp of the merits of each of the options. They also wanted to present all of the options to SBAB for final approval and judgment on reimbursement.

High School Principal Frank Orlando said that in 2003, the New England Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges would again visit Reading for an accreditation evaluation. During the last visit, in 1993, the committee raised concerns about the school's ability to meet the needs of the town and the growing student population.

Orlando said he hopes a project will be implemented prior to that date. The School Committee will discuss the plans further at its May 10 meeting.

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