

Governor reopens list for school project aid

Local districts scramble to submit applications by July 1 deadline

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Gov. Mitt Romney yesterday reluctantly agreed to accept new applications for state reimbursement of school construction projects, a move that could put plans in Peabody, Danvers, Swampscott and Manchester-by-the-Sea back on track.

But while those communities will have another four months to get their applications together, there's no guarantee the state will have the money to reimburse them once the projects are finished, the governor said.

Earlier this year, Romney clamped a lid on the popular but overtaxed School Building Assistance program, saying there was no way the state could pay for the more than 300 projects already on the program's waiting list, even before adding new projects.

Yesterday, the governor changed his mind, agreeing to a legislative proposal to give schools until July 1 to apply for aid. The measure is aimed at helping districts that are already well along in the planning of school projects. The program reimburses up to 75 percent of the cost of design and construction costs.

"I'm thrilled," said Peabody School Committee member David Gravel. "Believe me, we won't delay. Our application is going in."

Peabody hopes to receive up to 58 percent reimbursement for \$16 million worth of work on the high school's heating, air-conditioning and ventilation system. The major repairs are supposed to fix long-standing air quality problems.

Gravel ~~tried to submit~~ the paperwork to the state this week, but he was rebuffed because of the governor's moratorium.

Even as he was giving school districts more time yesterday, Romney was bemoaning the lack of money for the reimbursement program.

"The program has grown to an unsustainable size," Romney said yesterday. The state would have to pay more than \$11 billion for all the projects already in the pipeline, not including the 63 school districts that hope to get on the waiting list for reimbursement thanks to yesterday's extension. There is no source of revenue for those commitments, the governor's office said.

Calling the program a "budget buster," Romney directed state Education Commissioner David Driscoll to close the list on July 1. In the meantime, each community may submit one project, and only the "most urgent" will be considered.

Danvers and Swampscott officials believe their projects fit that description.

List: Romney gives schools a chance

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"Swampscott is seeking to replace a building that is over 100 years old," School Committee Chairman Kevin Breen said. "If that doesn't warrant the action ... I don't know what does."

Swampscott voters already approved a tax increase to pay for the \$47 million high school. The town hopes the state will pay for at least 52 percent of the project.

Officials kept working on their applications, even after the moratorium.

Danvers will seek a tax increase to help pay for a \$30.6 million middle school expansion and renovation. Not only are architects designing the middle school, but Town Manager Wayne Marquis is opening proposals from architects who want to renovate the high

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R-Ipswich

school, a \$50 million project slated to start in 2004.

Marquis is undeterred by the governor's plan to revamp the program. "I don't know what the facts will be like in June of 2004. To assume nothing would happen

would be imprudent."

Senate Majority Leader Fred Berry, D-Peabody, introduced the budget provision that pushes back the start of the moratorium, but legislators are telling their constituents not to count on timely payments.

That was state Rep. Brad Hill's message to the Manchester Essex regional district, which will apply for reimbursement for a \$34.2 million high school. Like Danvers, the Manchester Essex project still needs voter approval.

While communities should press forward, Hill, an Ipswich Republican, said they shouldn't plan their projects around a timely reimbursement from the state.

"Do not sell the project on the basis that you will receive payments in seven to 10 years," Hill said.