

Manchester-by-the-Sea

Building plan needs more work

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The Manchester Essex Regional School Committee vowed last week to bring the proposal to build a new \$34.2 million high school before voters in both towns, starting with Manchester's annual Town Meeting next month.

District and town officials agree they have their work cut out for them. School Committee member Jodi Harris, an Essex resident, supports the building project, but she worries about the short amount of time until the two Town Meetings in April and May and the June deadline for qualifying for 50 percent reimbursement from the state.

"From my perspective, there is no way on God's green earth we're going to get there in 30 days," she said.

School district and town officials have a number of loose ends to tie up before the construction of a high school-middle school complex on Lincoln Street in Manchester goes to voters. First among those, according to Harris and several of her colleagues, is finalizing the leases for the current school buildings.

Preliminaries

The two towns and the school district still are still working on the agreement allowing the regional district to use the three town-owned schools. Without proof the district has the right to use the property, the district could have trouble qualifying for state reimbursement. The documents also are important because in the

drafts, the towns take responsibility for covering the cost of any needed repairs to the buildings until July 2005.

Essex completed its draft lease two weeks ago, but Manchester's leases for Memorial School and the high school may not be done until March 20, said Selectmen Chairman Richard "Archie" Southgate. He's hoping to have the documents finished earlier so the school district's attorney can review the leases before they are signed.

Design details

Before the district can borrow money to build the school, it needs a plan for the building's design.

In January, the School Committee selected architecture firm Flansburgh Associates to design the new school. The district hasn't negotiated a contract with the firm yet, although Flansburgh has begun preliminary interviews with teachers to garner their input for the design.

Once Flansburgh is hired, the firm will begin design work on the building in earnest.

Principal architect Sidney Bowen said he won't be able to have complete design plans prepared in time for the town meetings, but would be able to provide a rough sketch to show voters by April. Flansburgh also will have sufficient time to prepare the schematic drawings the state requires by the June deadline, he said.

"The hardest issue, and the one I can't answer for you, is what your two communities need to feel comfortable with" the project, he said.

Selling the school

Perhaps the largest challenge will be to convince voters that this proposal is the best way to solve the high school's structural inadequacies. Concerns about the School Committee's recent infighting, resignations and the bookkeeping problems have distracted many residents from the building project, Manchester Selectwoman Mary Hardwick said.

"They're not focused on the new building, they're focused on building confidence in the School Committee," she said.

But School Committee members say they are ready to move forward, and those involved with the project believe it's the most cost-effective solution, said Building Subcommittee Chairman Joseph "Jody" Davis, who is also an Essex selectman. He said many residents will be enthusiastic once they see Flansburgh's rough idea for the campus.

But the process of selecting the school's site was a contentious one and some voters — in particular Essex residents, still question whether the site of the current high school has enough space for the high school-middle school complex they envision. If these opponents win out in one of the Town Meetings, that could pit the regional partners against each other, Harris said.

The Town Meetings and elections in both towns must approve the project for the new school to be built.

"The last thing we need is to have one town vote yes and one vote no," Harris said. "That's a very dangerous position."