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Editorial: School project shouldn't be rushed

"We have to get the confidence of the voters back," Manchester Essex Regional School Committee chairwoman Susan Beckmann shortly after a contentious debate recently.

But if that is indeed its goal, the committee has a strange way of going about reaching it. Instead of concentrating on stabilizing the system, the committee is embarking on a frantic rush to get a vote on a \$34.2-million high school project before town meeting voters.

It's a bit like ordering the ship full steam ahead before fixing a massive hole in the bow. And it is not likely to inspire the confidence of voters.

The high school project is a worthy one. But it will be tough for the committee to get ready for a vote in a month even if things were humming along smoothly. And they are not.

In recent weeks there have been resignations and infighting among members of the regional panel, and Superintendent David Connolly, facing mounting criticism for bookkeeping discrepancies and delays in conducting an audit, has announced he will be leaving at the end of the school year.

The amount of work which must be done to put the school project before Manchester's town meeting is enormous. The committee still doesn't have a design for the building or an architectural firm to draw one.

And all this to get at the end of a line hundreds of school systems long, every one of which is

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clamoring for money that isn't there.

Part of this is Gov. Mitt Romney's fault. Confronted with the realities of both the economy and the state budget, he had initially announced the state would not accept any new applications for school building assistance; then reversed himself and said the list would remain open until July 1. So the rush is on in Manchester, Danvers, Swampscott and every other community contemplating new construction.

But school systems still may not see any money for 15 years, if at all. Indeed, the state has no source of revenue even for the commitments it has already made.

The committee says it doesn't want to deny voters a choice. Fair enough. But a choice to build may be tantamount to stepping off a fiscal cliff. Voters would be wiser to take a step back instead.

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