

FinCom grapples with school question

By KATHLEEN McLAUGHLIN
Staff writer

3/19/03

DANVERS — The question of how much, if any, money the state will give Danvers for a new \$29.7 million middle school loomed over the Finance Committee's first round of numbers crunching last night.

The nine-member committee's recommendation will accompany the warrant article on the project, which a Special Town Meeting will consider March 31.

The article asks Town Meeting to approve paying a debt of \$28.19 million through an override of the Proposition 2½ tax cap — essentially a tax increase.

Chairman Joe Pennimpede indicated early in the night that he wanted to see an amendment that would block the town from spending the money if the state's reimbursement is less than 50 percent.

The article now says the money won't be spent unless the state's

Selectman Ken Brown said he doubts the state Department of Education will accept the project at all.

School Building Assistance program puts the middle school on a priority list.

"We need something more than just SBA acceptance of the project," Pennimpede said.

Town Manager Wayne Marquis is assuming that the state will refund 60 percent, and that in the end, the project will cost the town \$13.2 million, plus interest.

"It's a significant grant, and it does make a difference," Marquis said.

Selectman Ken Brown said he doubts the state Department of Education will accept the project at all.

Citing a letter posted on the state's Web site, he said the state will accept only the "most urgent" applications, those in which a school is overpopulated by 25 percent, or a building has been condemned.

"I see us in 'extreme need,' but I don't see us in that category," he said. The letter also cautions against preparing detailed architectural designs, acquiring land or holding votes on Proposition 2½ overrides in 2004, Brown said.

"That sentence threw me for a loop," he said. "We need to have a plan B in our back pocket."

Brown is opposed to a tax increase for the middle school. But even Selectman Mike Powers, who is with the majority of the board in favor of an override, said local officials have "no idea" whether the program will continue.

The town has until June 30 to secure financing and complete its application to the Department of Education. "That's really what we're

talking about here tonight," Powers said. "We need to get our application in to the state before this window closes."

Architect Ken DiNisco and Superintendent Betty Allen were on hand to answer questions about the project, which costs about \$7 million more than was first estimated several years ago.

DiNisco said, however, that the current estimate is lower than the firm's 1999 estimate, plus 6 percent inflation.

Pennimpede opened the floor first to the audience of about 60 people, many of whom were Town Meeting members. The committee didn't begin its own questioning until 10 p.m. and wasn't expected to vote last night.

The Town Meeting vote will help decide whether the issue goes to a general election ballot on May 6. The project also needs the approval of four of the five selectmen before making the ballot.