

Officials push new school plan

Board works to get message to public

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MANCHESTER — Meredith Tufts admits she may not be able to answer all of the questions people have regarding the proposed \$34.2 million middle and high school the Manchester Essex Regional School Committee wants to build.

But this week the School Committee chairwoman, and other members of the regional School Committee will hold two public meetings about the proposal.

The School Committee has allocated up to \$5,000 to hire Bill Wrinn, a public relations consultant, to prepare fact sheets, and disseminate questionnaires at the public forums. The School Committee is also upgrading its Web site, www.mersd.org, with the goal of making it easier to navigate and to access information.

The School Committee accepted a recommendation last October from the 14-member School Building Committee to build a new 700-student middle school and high school complex for grades 6 through 12 on the site of the football field adjacent to the current high school on Lincoln Street. The plan calls for a two-year construction schedule — once completed, students would transfer into the new building, and con-

tractors would raze the 78,000-square-foot, 42-year-old building. The plan also calls for relocating the athletic fields to a yet-to-be-named site. The School Building Committee estimated it would cost \$1.3 million to relocate the fields.

"We'll be presenting where we are to date on the entire project," Tufts said, describing the meetings.

By the spring, Essex and Manchester residents should have a much clearer understanding of

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JODI HARRIS
School Committee member

whether the plan will go forward. The plan will come before town meetings in April and May, and needs two-thirds approval in each town to move forward. If both town meetings endorse the plan, then voters in Essex and Manchester will go to the polls. For the school to be built, it must pass by a majority in each town.

Out of the 1,117 students in the school district, 766 live in Manchester. If passed, Manchester property owners would shoulder 65 percent of the cost of the project, with Essex taxpayers picking up the remaining 35 percent. Wrinn, the board's public relations specialist, said that because of the possible change in subsidies from the state's School Building Assistance program, it would not be "accurate" to put a price on how much taxpayers would pay each year for the plan.

Since endorsing the plan, the School Committee has solicited architectural and design bids and expects to select a firm this week.

Tufts believes the schematic design will be prepared in time for the town meetings. Another factor motivating the committee is the possible cut in subsidies from the state's School Building Assistance program. To become eligible for subsidies, the School Committee must submit the schematics to the state by June 30. Tufts estimated that the state would reimburse 40 to 50 percent of the project, if approved by voters.

But the plan, even at its early stage, is not without critics. School Committee member Jodi Harris, who voted against the plan in October, believes that residents in the two communities may have more questions about the plan than answers.

"I think it's being rushed," said Harris, a three-year School Committee member. "I continue to wait for answers to my questions."

Harris said two major issues have still not been resolved — relocating the football field, baseball field, and two tennis courts that occupy 3 acres at the present site, and would serve as the footprint for the new building on Lincoln Street. She also wants the town of Manchester to clarify the ownership status of 5 acres of land adjacent to the 7-acre school facility.

According to Harris, part of the proposal incorporates the school's usage of the 5 acres, where two town-owned buildings now stand, including the headquarters of the Manchester Water Department.

Town administrator Rosemary Cashman said a Town Meeting vote in the 1950s ceded the property to the school department on the condition of the water department finding a new location. "That hasn't happened," said Cashman.

"I want to know if we can renovate or tear down the buildings," said Harris.

Harris, along with another contingent of Essex residents led by Richard Trembowicz, also questioned the reasoning of building a new high school on a 7-acre strip of land. The two Essex residents believe the school should have been built on a 30-acre site in Essex that had been offered for \$2 million.

The site, known as the Van Wyck property, was rejected by the School Building Committee, and the School Committee last fall. Tufts said the acquisition and development costs of the Van Wyck property would have been "millions of dollars" more than the proposed Lincoln Street site.

Trembowicz, an attorney and father of a first-grader, presented a 200-name petition to the School Committee last fall urging the board to reconsider the Van Wyck property. He said the 200 Manchester and Essex residents still want that option to be considered. "Municipalities seldom have the opportunity to acquire affordable land at reasonable prices," said Trembowicz, who estimated that the Van Wyck site would cost \$550,000 more than the Lincoln Street site to develop. "As a taxpayer, it is difficult to support the proposal with so many holes and unknowns."

The informational meetings will be held Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Essex Elementary & Middle School, and Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at the Manchester Essex Regional High School.