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Schools adjust funding

By Melissa Russell / Staff Writer

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Committee cuts books, furniture funds for RMHS renovation

Funds earmarked for furniture, library books and educational technology will be temporarily reduced in order to keep the Reading Memorial High School renovation project on track, School Committee officials decided Monday night. The committee voted to engage TLT Construction Corporation of Wakefield as general contractor for the renovation, at a cost of \$44,492,700, approximately two percent higher than pre-bid estimates.

Because of the higher-than-expected construction costs, monies will need to be reallocated in order to keep the project within budget, officials determined. School Committee members expressed optimism that the money will be restored from unused contingency funds once the construction phase is completed.

The contingency fund, which is reserved to cover unexpected costs that arise during construction, was also reduced from the customary five percent to 4.5 percent or \$2 million dollars.

The recent skyrocketing costs of steel is driving up construction costs industry-wide, according to project manager Scott Dunlap, and is responsible for the higher than expected bids.

TLT Construction Corporation was the lowest of only three general contractor bids submitted for the project; an amount the architect admitted was "disappointing." The next lowest bid, from Eastern Contractors of Framingham, came in at \$48,817,000, and J&J Contractors, Inc./Morganti of Lowell, entered a bid of \$52,707,000.

Keith Hoffses, principal of Design Partnership of Cambridge, the project architect, said his company has positive prior public construction experience with TLT Construction, and recommended they be awarded the contract.

The committee also voted to include the first add/alternate in the contract, which allocates \$379,000 to construct a synthetic practice field.

Committee members Lisa Gibbs, Carl McFadden, and Chairman Harvey "Pete" Dahl supported the addition of the field, but Elaine Webb and Robert Spadafora questioned the expenditure.

While she agreed that the price was "a phenomenal deal on the field," Webb said she was "struggling" over voting for it.

"We just struggled to name reductions for the project as a whole," she said. "How important is this to the community in the scope of the high school project?"

Spadafora added, "I have reservations about the add/alternates coming on the heels of the temporary reductions of the technology budget. The field will still be there, even if it isn't synthetic. Adding it isn't prudent."

McFadden pressed for the fields, calling the natural surface a "mud pit when it rains, and a dustbowl" that aggravates students' asthma when it is dry. He added that the town spends thousands to water the field to keep the dust down, and that a synthetic field would cut down on operational costs down the line. He also stated that the field could be used to generate income if a per-child surcharge was levied on those using it for town-sponsored sports.

"I guarantee this will be the largest source of revenue to the community after the Burbank Arena," he said, adding, "We will have four thousand kids using the facility for soccer, t-ball, and baseball."

Dahl pushed the committee to vote, saying, "if we don't vote tonight it will be off the table permanently. If we want it in two or three years, we won't get it at this price."

After a brief retreat into executive session, the committee supported the add/alternate 5-1, with Elaine Webb voting against.

In other business, representatives from the Finance Committee attended Monday night's meeting in order to discuss Town Meeting warrant Article 13. The School Committee is requesting that Town Meeting allow them to transfer unused funds from the new elementary school building project to cover costs on the Barrows elementary school renovation. Because bidding for the Barrows project will not be complete until April 30, Fincom determined that they would wait to review the bids, and then make its recommendation on May 6, the final night of Town Meeting.

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