

## 83 schools make 1st cut for state building funds Program will give priority to repairs

The Boston Globe

By John C. Drake and James Vaznis, Globe Staff | November 28, 2007

Eighty-three schools around Massachusetts have been selected as the leading candidates for millions of dollars in school construction money, potentially bringing relief to parents, educators, and school administrators frustrated for years by crumbling libraries, classrooms, and roofs.

State engineers and architects have determined that the schools, such as Southbridge High School where the library is settling unevenly on a hill, are in such poor condition that students' safety and education are in jeopardy.

The Massachusetts School Building Authority will vote today on whether to approve the list, which was culled from an initial pool of 423 requests representing 162 districts asking for state money. While not a guarantee of funding, the selection means the schools won the first round of a stiff competition for \$2.5 billion set to be spent on school construction over the next five years.

"Every district that is among the 83 schools should greet this with real jubilation after a four-year moratorium," said Katherine Craven, executive director of the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

The state had delayed school construction spending for years in order to get the new building authority up and running. In its first year, the school building program is authorized to spend up to \$500 million, which would cover repairs, feasibility studies, design work, and some initial payments for construction of new buildings that win approval.

Of the 83 schools, those likely to receive the quickest funding are 27 that the authority believes need repairs to their existing buildings. They include Winthrop Senior High School, which needs a new boiler, and the Chandler Elementary School in Duxbury, where a new roof would ward off more costly repairs.

The other 56 schools may require more extensive work, up to replacement, but what the state pays will depend on the feasibility studies and discussions between the authority and local officials. Seven of those schools have already launched significant work at local expense; they, too, will undergo feasibility studies that will closely assess the needs.

Schools slated for repairs could begin receiving state checks next spring, and even schools where new construction is needed could begin getting partial payments as soon as next year if the feasibility study determines construction is warranted, said state Treasurer Timothy P. Cahill.

Schools that got the nod for feasibility studies include Central Middle School in Quincy, Natick High School, and Wellesley High School.

Wellesley is considering a new school that could cost \$150 million. In Quincy, a local task force determined 10 years ago that Central Middle School, built in 1894, was "operating on borrowed time." A 2004 electrical fire caused extensive damage to the school's library.

Approval for a feasibility study couldn't come quickly enough for the 81-year-old Southbridge High School, where shifting land on a hill with ledge has caused structural damage to the building's three-decade-old library and media center, forcing the district to close those rooms. Now, the approximately 400 students in the district, located in the central part of the state near the Connecticut border, are making do with a library squeezed into two portable classrooms.

Cahill said the school building program, set up by the Legislature in 2004, is designed to force districts to justify their requests. The idea was that in working with the authority, districts in some cases would choose to seek state-funded repairs, rather than new schools.

"We want to send a message that this is a way to get funding quickly by identifying repairs as opposed to brand new schools," said Cahill, who also serves as chairman of the School Building Authority.

The feasibility studies will verify enrollment projections, investigate alternatives to expensive new buildings, and pore over bid documents. He said the new approach contrasts with the state's previous process in which state funding for school

projects was either approved outright or summarily rejected. Now, the state monitors the process more closely.

"In the old way, you either got on the list or didn't get on the list, and if you got on the list, you're almost completely on your own," Cahill said. "We're going to be more collaborative."

After the feasibility studies, the authority will make a final decision which projects will get state money. In the end, the state will pick up half the cost of approved projects. Cahill said school systems identified for feasibility studies should feel comfortable seeking funding from their town meetings with assurance from the state that their building projects are viable.

For 45 schools that didn't make the list, the news is not good. Their projects have been put on hold by the authority, because their documentation revealed a lack of long-range planning, or the problems identified were not severe enough to warrant state funding.

"In some cases, the districts didn't make the case loud and clear, and in some cases the project just needs to wait" because other schools were in worse shape, Craven said.

At least one school district was not surprised to be left out of the initial round. That city submitted requests for 17 projects and has conducted its own assessment of its needs. The Newton School Committee's chairwoman, Dori Zaleznik, said the school building authority has yet to evaluate the district's buildings.

Newton is, however, in the midst of building a new Newton North High School for roughly \$155 million and the state had already approved about \$46 million in reimbursement under the previous program.

The authority received funding requests from 423 schools representing 162 districts by the July 31 deadline. In a late change to the process prompted by the overwhelming volume of funding requests, the authority insisted that each district identify its most needy school, and limited its review to that more manageable list.

Some of the other projects in the original 162 were not approved because the authority wants them to consider regional approaches to their school building needs. Also, other requests by vocational schools were delayed because the authority wants those schools to more closely examine their mission.

In Norwood, where the school building authority kicked off its inspection of schools earlier this year, a feasibility study is expected to settle a heated debate in town over the fate of the 80-year-old high school, noted for its stately brick exterior and clock tower. School leaders favor knocking down the building for a new school, much to the dismay of some residents.

Sean Dixon, spokesman for the Norwood Common Sense Committee, which has been advocating preserving the high school, said he's looking forward to what he hopes is an objective analysis of the issue by the state. His group disagrees with school officials' contention that it would be a less expensive building from scratch.

Hanover voters approved \$3.1 million for designs for a high school project two years ago, and the district is eager to determine whether it can renovate or expand its nearly 50-year-old building, or build new. "The feasibility study is good news," said school superintendent Kristine Nash. "Now the hard work begins." ■