

ABINGTON

Current site tops school options list

By Jean Lang | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 04, 2013

Building a middle and high school campus on the existing high school property is at the top of a list of preliminary options drawn up by the architects hired to suggest solutions for Abington's outdated and overcrowded schools.

Scott Dunlap, a partner with Aig Architects LLC, the Wayland firm hired to do the feasibility study, said the town could potentially save millions of dollars by using the 46-acre site that is centrally located and has water, sewer, and other utilities already in place rather than if the campus were built from scratch on undeveloped land.

And in small communities like Abington, which has 2,100 students in pre-kindergarten through grade 12, he said, bringing together student populations could enable the town to get reimbursements for shared resources, such as a 750-seat auditorium, media center, or athletic facilities.

Dunlap said the plan is to present various options to the community this fall, as well as submit them to the Massachusetts School Building Authority for initial review. No renderings of any of the options have been drawn up, nor any costs estimated, at this point.

A more defined proposal is expected to be presented to Town Meeting in the fall of 2014, according to Abington School Building Committee members.

“If we can address multiple needs with one project, I think that’s the ideal scenario, in my opinion,” said Richard Testa, chairman of the building committee and father of a 5-year-old and 8-year-old. “There’s a certain amount of efficiency built into that site.”

The architects said a new building could be built next to the existing high school that would accommodate grades 5-12 and have PreK facilities. The existing high school would be demolished when the new building was finished.

Under this scenario, Beaver Brook Elementary, which currently serves grades 1-4, could be used as a K-2 school with a full-day kindergarten, and Woodsdale Elementary, which serves grades 5 and 6, could be used as a grades 3-4 school. Center School (PreK-K) and the Frolio Middle School would be closed.

Variations of this plan include renovating and expanding the existing high school or assigning only grades 6-12 to either a new or renovated building on the high school property at 201 Gliniewicz Way.

Superintendent Peter Schafer said separate middle and high schools would be maintained, even if both are located on the same site and share some of the same resources, such as a cafeteria or athletic fields.

“This is a great opportunity for Abington to provide to the children and the community the buildings it needs for decades, the foreseeable future,” he said.

The school building committee plans to meet on Aug. 26, but a smaller working group of members meets weekly.

Testa and Schafer said the timing of the project is also an opportunity to have the state pay for more than half the costs, as it is doing with the feasibility study. The state is picking up 55.6 percent of the \$800,000 cost of the study.

Testa said he is hopeful that residents will support a project that he said would be a resource for the entire town, particularly since Town Meeting voted in 2012 to approve the study. The money for the study was affirmed by a vote of 1,214 to 857 in an election on April 28, 2012.

Jim Dombrowski, who led an effort opposing a previous proposal to build a school on Griffin's Farm, said he favors putting a middle and high school on the current high school land.

"There will be people opposed to a new school simply because they don't want to see their taxes go up," he said, adding that he does not want his taxes to climb either, but that he feels the schools have been neglected.

The high school, built 50 years ago, is the town's newest school building. The Frolio Middle School was built in 1936.

An array of other options listed by the architects involve renovating or expanding the middle school and elementary schools. The options were developed after eight months of meetings and studies by Ai3, Dunlap said.

George Whiting, an elder law attorney and member of the school building committee, graduated 50 years ago, just before the current high school was built. He said he is equally concerned about the school facilities and taxpayers' ability to pay for any project.

"While I profess to know the schools need a tremendous uplift, where is the money for it going to come from?" he said. "I'm looking for the best bang for our buck."

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