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Abington to vote on town's first new school in 50 years

By Jean Lang | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 18, 2014



AI3 ARCHITECTS

An architectural rendering of the proposed school.

Abington Town Meeting voters will be asked on Sept. 27 to say yes or no to a proposed \$96.4 million middle and high school, to be built on the current high school property on Gliniewicz Way.

If two-thirds of voters give the go-ahead, the proposal will appear on the local election ballot Oct. 18, where a simple majority of votes would give the town the green light to build its first new school in more than 50 years.

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The school would house grades 5 through 8 in one wing and grades 9 through 12 in another, along with shared facilities in between and preschool classrooms at the end of the high school wing.

Supporters of the proposal argue that Abington is the only one of more than three dozen surrounding communities from Quincy to Plymouth that has not built a new school or done major school renovations in the past 20 years.

The proponents, who call themselves ABC, or Abington/A Better Community, have been planting lawn signs, knocking on doors, and preparing a mailing to get out the vote.

“We probably have the oldest schools in southern Massachusetts, which is not bragging rights,” said Jack Bailey, owner of Bailey’s Garage and cochairman of the proponents group.

Abington’s high school, the most recently built school in the district, opened in 1962, and the Frolio Middle School was built in 1937.

Bailey, a self-proclaimed “townie,” said he doesn’t have any family in the schools and didn’t attend Abington High School himself — he graduated from Cardinal Spellman High School in Brockton 50 years ago — but that he believes the new school is needed for students and teachers, and would be the best option for taxpayers. Bailey’s wife, Kathy, is a member of the local School Committee and the School Building Committee.

Although there appears to be no organized opposition to the project and both the town’s Board of Selectmen and Finance Committee have endorsed it, Bailey and other supporters say they realize there are residents who have voiced concerns about taxes, traffic, and other issues, who may not support the proposal. They say they are not taking the votes lightly.

“The fight’s not over until it’s over,” Bailey said, adding that he and others expect a large turnout for the Town Meeting vote, set for 10 a.m. in the high school gym.

“We are cautiously optimistic,” said ABC cochairwoman Jeanie Barrett, a mother of fourth- and sixth-graders.

She said some of the group’s lawn signs and banners have disappeared, but members are hoping it’s not opponents who are behind it.

“I have faith in the voters if they have all the facts,” she said.

Meanwhile, town officials are expecting the Massachusetts School Building Authority to approve the project at its Sept. 24 meeting and determine how much of it would be paid by the state.

Town officials are estimating that the state would pay for at least 50 percent of the project, as it is doing for the cost of the feasibility study approved by Town Meeting in 2012.

The town would finance its share through long-term borrowing, estimated initially to cost taxpayers with an average home assessment (\$281,145) about \$600 a year, starting in 2017 or 2018.

Approximately two-thirds of homeowners would pay less than the estimate, according to school and town officials.

Bailey and others argue it makes more sense to build the new school than to rehab the old buildings.

Some of the pluses of a new school being touted are better technology, improved security, and more space, including an auditorium, something the town doesn’t have now. And with the new building, the lower grades would be reconfigured to ease overcrowding, with K-2 to be taught in the Beaver Brook Elementary School, and grades 3 and 4 moved to the Woodsdale School. Plans call for the Frolio to be used for administration and the North and Center schools to be turned over to the Board of Selectmen to determine whether to sell or reuse them.

School Superintendent Peter Schafer said some people have had questions and concerns, such as whether students in the various grades should be housed together. He said the pre-K, middle, and high schoolers would be in separate wings of the building and have separate primary entrances and schedules.

“Once you talk through the project, the majority of people see the need to move forward,” Schafer said.

If residents give the go-ahead, bidding on the project, according to information provided by the Abington School Building Committee, would be slated for fall 2015, with construction potentially occurring from December 2015 through December 2017. Final site preparation could last through December 2018.

“The time is right for this to happen,” said Mike Franey, a selectman and member of the School Building Committee. “This will meet our educational needs for a long time to come.”

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