Middle school bond makes the ballot

Stalled proposal survives many roadblocks, paving the way for voters to decide its fate

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WOONSOCKET – After months of political wrangling, the city has finally won legislative approval to hold a middle school bond referendum.

And thanks to the efforts of State Reps. Jon Brien (D-Dist. 50) and Lisa Baldelli-Hunt (D-Dist. 49), it's a sweeter deal than the city was expecting. Under a joint amendment sponsored by the legislators and passed by the House on Wednesday, the city is no longer obligated to convey profits from the sale of Woonsocket Middle School to the state, leaving perhaps $1 million more for building new schools in city coffers.

According to State Sen. Marc A. Cote (D-Dist. 24), the measure still authorizes the city borrow up to $74 million for the middle school project, with a cap of $70 million eligible for housing aid reimbursement from the state at the rate of 82 percent. As the curtain closes on the 2007 legislative session, the Senate passed a companion measure Thursday.

"Although it's not what we were looking for and although we're disappointed in the Senate leadership's reducing the project funding, it's absolutely vital that we do the project this year," said Planning Director Joel Mathews. "We have a good project to present to voters and we hope they agree."

Brien said he and his House colleagues had been lobbying for additional monetary concessions for the city since last week, arguing that the legislature had been unfairly stingy with the city, even in a starkly tight budget year. Eliminating a stipulation in the previously approved version of the referendum bill that allowed the state to confiscate the proceeds of the sale of WMS was the easiest way to funnel more money to the city, he said.

"No other city or town in the state has ever been subject that that kind of stipulation when building a school," said Brien. "Woonsocket's schoolchildren need these new schools, and it's not fair to them or to our citizens to tack on extra requirements to try to make us the sacrificial lamb in some fight over state policy."

The city had sought approval for an $80 million bond referendum some four months ago, but it was forced to scale back the project in a bitter debate with Senate leaders. In view of the state's dire financial forecast, the Senate leaders argued, the price tag for the schools was just too high.

Beyond the legislative wrangling that has bogged down the project, Mathews had recently issued a full-scale alert that the preferred version of the project – twin, freestanding middle schools at a 20-acre mill site on Hamlet Avenue – could be in jeopardy because of a proposal from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Army Corps of Engineers to redraw the city's flood zone maps.

Late Thursday afternoon, however, Mathews declared the threat over. Following a flurry of meetings with a phalanx of engineers at the state Department of Environmental Management, he said, the city feels comfortable moving forward at the Hamlet Avenue site after all. A bond referendum is currently scheduled for Aug. 14.

See BOND, Page A-4

New paper: The Call
Date: June 22, 2007
Page: A-1

Bond

Continued from Page A-1

"We are able to proceed with the Hamlet Avenue option," Mathews said. "We have worked through our issues with DEM wetlands."

As a precaution that will cost comparatively little, Mathews said the city will build the two schools at a higher elevation than originally planned, keeping them out of the envisioned flood zones.

But Mathews said the proposed maps could still have an impact on property rights in much of the Social Flatlands, and city officials must continue working to resolve their issues with FEMA and the Corps. They are threatening to decertify the local flood control system unless the city complete about $1 million worth of maintenance to the South Main Street flood control dam and earthen levees along the banks of the Blackstone River.

The work includes new paint and improved electrical systems for the dam and the removal of large trees from the levees, officials say.

Had the city been forced to scuttle the Hamlet Avenue site, it would have asked voters to approve Plan B – new middle schools at Barry Field and Aylsworth Avenue. Unlike the twin 770-student schools planned for Hamlet Avenue, the Barry Field facility would house about 1,000 students, Aylsworth Avenue, about 660, Mathews said.

Now that officials are focused on the Hamlet Avenue site, the timeline for the project is especially fragile, according to Mathews.

In order to qualify for the 82-percent housing aid reimbursement for the project, work must begin by next spring so that the schools are "substantially complete" by June 30, 2010 – the state Department of Education's deadline for releasing the construction subsidy.

Between now and next spring, however, the city has a massive amount of prep work to complete, including the acquisition of the construction site from two different owners, demolition of several cavernous mills on the parcel and the removal of contaminated soil, the legacy of a series of mill previous mill fires.

The latest financials for the project show that, including interest and principal, the project will cost $122.1 million over 25 years. Given the housing aid deal – one the city will likely never see again because DOE is recalibrating the cost-sharing formula – the city's share of the burden will be about $28.9 million, or less than $1.2 million per year, on average.