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SOMERSET HILLS REGIONAL SCHOOLS

Referendum touted as beneficial

By W. JACOB PERRY
STAFF WRITER

BERNARDSVILLE – A referendum seeking voter approval for \$5.8 million in facilities upgrades in the Somerset Hills Regional School District, including a new high school media center, was touted by Board of Education members Wednesday as they officially voted to put it on the Tuesday, Nov. 3 general election ballot.

Board members said at their meeting last Wednesday, Aug. 26, that the upgrades are needed and would provide long-term benefits at a relatively low cost because the state would pay 40 percent of the debt service.

"I think this is a great project," said board member Lou Palma, chairman of the facilities committee. "We're all behind it and and hopefully the community is behind it. Everyone would benefit."

The board backed the proposal in an 8-0 vote, with board member Greg DiGiocchino absent.

Board member Robert Baker, chairman of the finance committee, said if the district were to fund the project with a 15-year bond issue at an interest rate of 2.75 percent, the average annual tax impact would be \$8 per \$100,000 of assessed property value, equating to \$40 per year for a \$500,000 property, and \$80 per year for a \$1 million property.

A 20-year bond at 3 percent would reduce the an-

nual impact to \$6.50 per \$100,000, but a decision on a payment schedule isn't required yet, Baker said.

"The cost of borrowing is very cheap" for the time being, he remarked.

Board President Donna Coons noted that if the referendum fails, the district would lose the 40 percent debt funding from the state.

The question will go on the general election ballot in the district's three towns – Bernardsville, Far Hills and Peapack-Gladstone. Bedminster Township sends its high school students to the district on a tuition basis but its residents do not vote on financial referendums.

The biggest component would be a plan to convert Bernards High School's old auditorium into a media center and, in turn, convert the school's existing library into four classrooms. Three would be for special education.

Other components of the referendum include:

- Remodeling the bathrooms at Bedwell Elementary School.
- Expanding Bernards High's lower parking lot to provide 28 additional parking stalls.
- Repairing the parking lot between the Olcott Building and Bernards High.
- Repairing the road around Bernardsville Middle School (BMS), located off Seney Drive.
- Installing safety improvements at the BMS and Bedwell campus, including a sidewalk extension.

Project Details

Most of those components were discussed in detail at last Wednesday's meeting.

On hand was the district's architectural consultant, William Bannister of Rockaway-based Parette Somjen Architects, LLC.

The old auditorium, which held 600 recently re-

moved seats, has gone largely unused since late 2007 when the new, 1,013-seat Bernards High Performing Arts Center (PAC) was opened.

School officials have said a conversion would produce a media center nearly twice as large as the school's current library.

Bannister told the board that said the plans call for "a 21st century library that will be a flexible space for a multitude of uses." He said one would enter a "socializing area" and could proceed to a "semi-social" area with "some privacy," and then to a rear "quiet section" for individual or group learning.

There would also be a partial second level with a "semi-quiet" area and possible senior class lounge extending from one side, and space for two classrooms extending from the other, Bannister said.

"It typifies what is in a college environment," he said.

Palma drew attention to a Bernards High student's letter, published in the Aug. 20 edition of **The Bernardsville News**, which faulted the existing library as small and outdated. "It really details what's needed and why it's needed," he said.

Palma also touted the proposed location, saying the new library would be immediately behind a main entrance instead of in "the lower level of the back of the building."

The existing library would be remade to include three special education classrooms, one of which could be divided, plus one general education classroom, and space for "a school store" in which special needs students could learn a trade by selling school merchandise or other items.

School Business Administrator Nancy Hunter said the special education rooms could accommodate local special needs students who are now sent to out-of-district schools at annual tuition rates that can exceed \$75,000. She said the district

has already identified 11 such students who will need accommodations over the next four years.

The conversion "will definitely be a cost savings for our annual budget," Hunter said.

Board member Nancy Palazzolo added that the proposed special education rooms are "pretty much standard at other schools. We were behind. We were sorely lacking and costing taxpayers money by sending students out" of the district.

Palazzolo stressed that the referendum "hasn't been a rush to judgment." She said the old auditorium has been unused space for about a decade. She also characterized the Bedwell bathrooms as "disgusting," saying if she attended the school, "I'd go home to go to the bathroom."

"This is not an extravagant proposal by any stretch of the imagination," she said.

Palma said the plans to convert the old auditorium into a media center date back to the passage of the last voter referendum in September 2003. "We have been thinking about it for years and years."

He said the current library is undersized for the number of students. "It's not that we're trying to get something overly extravagant for our students," he added. "We're way behind what the state says we should have."

Superintendent of Schools Frances Wood said "literacy begins and ends with the library. We have wonderful (high school) rankings but we have no functioning library. That astounds me."

Wood characterized the Bedwell bathrooms and the Bernards High parking situation as "atrocious." In the latter instance, "You can't find parking. Nobody has any place to park."

"You want people to come and say (the school environment) represents the socio-economic status you have there," she said.

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