



Erie School District coal bunkers get overdue goodbye

By Ed Palattella

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As its \$80.8 million renovation project advances, the district is filling big holes behind 3 of its older schools.

The Erie School District is hard at work filling three big holes.

As it undertakes one of its busiest construction seasons in years, the district is in various stages of excavating and sealing off obsolete coal bunkers that are underneath the rear parking lots of three of the district's older buildings — Jefferson and Lincoln elementary schools and Wilson Middle School.

The repairs at Jefferson, 230 E. 38th St., and Wilson, 718 E. 28th St., are moving along. Contractors have cut off the ceilings of the bunkers, reinforced their walls and are starting to pour gravel into them. Excavation is expected to start soon of the coal bunker at Lincoln, 831 E. 31st St.

The large holes are remnants of the era when coal was the primary source of heat in the city of Erie. The 11,000-student district is repairing the bunkers to eliminate the danger of collapse, and the work is included in the district's buildingwide renovation project, whose first phase will cost about \$80.8 million.

"As it was, we blocked off traffic over the Wilson and Jefferson bunkers because we were afraid that they couldn't take the weight of even a passenger car," said Neal Brokman, the school district's executive director of operations.

The coal bunker at Wilson, which was built in 1927, is 31 feet and 4 inches by 131 feet and 4 inches and about 14 feet deep. The bunker at Jefferson, built in 1930, is 29 feet and 4 inches by 69 feet and 4 inches and about 12 feet deep. The bunker at Lincoln, built in 1916, is 18 feet by 83 feet and 9 inches and 10 feet deep.

Filling the holes is expensive. The district will spend \$349,000 to fix Wilson, the largest, which will require as much as 2,100 cubic yards of fill. One cubic yard of material typically fits in the bed of a pickup truck.

The cost for Wilson includes architectural fees and electrical and plumbing expenses. Waterproofing the bunkers is a critical part of the repairs, Brokman said.

“If you just fill them with pea gravel and you did not address the water infiltration issue, you would just have a hole that would let water get back into the building,” Brokman said.

The district for years has put off long-needed building repairs and improvements because of lack of funding. Its receipt of \$14 million in additional annual state aid, starting in 2018, has allowed it to spend about \$3 million a year to finance the \$50 million in bond proceeds that are paying for much of the \$80.8 million project. The district is using cash to pay for the rest.

The district will wrap the \$50 million in bonds around its current bond debt and extend its debt payments by three years, to 2034.

The current project is the district’s largest capital-improvement undertaking since it issued \$37.3 million in bonds in 2000 to finance the major renovations of several buildings, including Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy and Harding School.

The current renovations focus on basic needs — new roofs and heating and ventilation systems at many of the district’s 16 school buildings and infrastructure repairs to all the schools and other facilities, including Erie Veterans Memorial Stadium.

But even in a project whose major repairs are meant to keep the schools “warm, safe and dry,” as Erie schools Superintendent Brian Polito has said, the work at the coal bunkers represents some of the most basic repairs of all.

They are not just “behind-the-wall” fixes, as Polito has also said of the overall renovations. The work at the coal bunkers is underground and somewhat unanticipated.

The district's architects and structural engineers discovered the problems with the Wilson coal bunker as they toured the district's buildings and parking lots this past fall, when they were determining the scope of the overall renovation project. The district then decided to fill the bunkers at Jefferson and Lincoln elementary schools.

"The reminder is that we need to expect the unexpected," Polito said. "These are old buildings."

Brokman, who is overseeing the renovation project for the school district, said he does not expect additional surprises related to coal bunkers.

"There better not be any more out there," he said.

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 BUY PHOTO

 HIDE CAPTION

Crews on June 25 fill a space that once was a coal bunker located on the north side and underneath Wilson Middle School in Erie. It's one of three coal bunkers at Erie School District schools being filled as part of an \$80.8 million facilities upgrade project in the district.



 BUY PHOTO

 HIDE CAPTION

Construction was underway Wednesday on a coal bunker located behind Jefferson Elementary School in Erie. It's one of three coal bunkers at Erie School District schools being filled as part of an \$80.8 million facilities upgrade project in the district. [JACK HANRAHAN/ERIE TIMES-NEWS]