



'Great to get moving:' Erie schools start renovations

By Ed Palattella

Posted Jun 11, 2019 at 2:00 AM

School district embarks on first phase of \$80.7 million project to repair buildings, including Veterans Memorial Stadium.

The students are gone for the summer, but many schools in the Erie School District are alive with activity.

Monday marked the start of the summer construction season for the district as it embarks on its \$80.7 million, three-year plan to renovate many of its schools and other facilities. They include Erie Veterans Memorial Stadium, which on Monday was filled with noise from concrete-breaking machines.

Most of the work throughout the district involves basic but costly repairs, such as the installation of new roofs at Harding Elementary School and Wilson Middle School and the filling in of obsolete coal bunkers at Wilson and Jefferson and Lincoln elementary schools. Also, swipe-card systems will go in to improve safety at the entrances to all district schools.

The work that started on Monday represents the first phase of the first year of renovations, which Superintendent Brian Polito said is designed to keep the 11,000-student school district's 16 school buildings and its other facilities "warm, safe and dry." The district had held off on launching all the construction until school let out for the summer this past week.

"It is great to get moving," Polito said on Monday. "It is nice to see the long-overdue work on the buildings starting."

The district's protracted financial crisis prevented spending on building improvements for years until the General Assembly voted in 2017 to allocate an additional \$14 million in annual state aid to keep the district solvent.

The Erie School District's executive director of operations, Neal Brokman, is overseeing the work for the district, whose architect on the project is HHSDR, of Sharon.

"This is 100 percent deferred maintenance," Brokman said of the reasons for the repairs. "It is something that you should be doing every 30 years, but we haven't."

He said some of the roofs under repair, such as at Harding Elementary School, which was built in 1924 and last renovated in 2002, are failing earlier than expected.

The district is paying for the renovation project with \$30 million in cash and \$50 million in bonds that it is financing using about \$3 million of the \$14 million annually. 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 Erie School Board in December approved the first phase of the project, and the board over the past several months approved the bids for the phase, which totals about \$9 million. That amounts to about 11 percent of the cost of the entire three-year project, which the district most recently set at \$80.7 million. Previous estimates had been closer to \$80.8 million, but the figures have changed slightly as the district has dealt with changes to the scope of the work.

Later stages of the \$80.7 million project will feature improvements to heating and ventilation systems at many schools and new windows at Erie High School, whose gym will get bleachers. Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy will get masonry and structural repairs.

The 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 Collegiate and Harding. The district called that project Erie 2000.

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HIDE CAPTION

Colton Fleming uses a chipping gun to break away concrete from the walls of Erie Veterans Memorial Stadium on Monday. Fleming, 22, works for Carl Walker Construction of Pittsburgh, which is doing much of the stadium's renovation work. [CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE/ERIE TIMES-NEWS]



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Roy Detwiler, 56, at left, and Trent Sieg, 32, at right, move plywood sheathing across the roof Harding Elementary School in Erie on Monday. The men are assistant foremen on the project for Northwestern Roofing Co. of Erie. [CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE/ERIE TIMES-NEWS]



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Crews from Northwestern Roofing Co. of Erie are replacing the roof on Harding Elementary School in Erie, shown here on Monday. The project is part of an \$80.7 million facilities plan for the Erie School District, with renovations scheduled for all 16 school buildings and other district facilities. [CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE/ERIE TIMES-NEWS]



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The parking lot at Lincoln Elementary School is scheduled to be replaced as part of the Erie School District's facilities plan. [CHRISTOPHER MILLETTE/ERIE TIMES-NEWS]