

Erie schools unveil \$80.8 million buildings plan



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Jim Vieira, dean of Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy, highlights problems that the Erie School District's renovation plan is designed to address.

Every occupied school in the district as well as other buildings, such as Veterans Stadium, would undergo renovations or repairs in the massive three-year project. Bonds would pay for most of the work.

The Erie School District is getting ready to plug its leaks.

And replace its roofs.

And pave its parking lots.

And renovate the gym at Erie High.

And reinforce and seal the promenade at Northwest Pennsylvania Collegiate Academy.

And even replace the artificial turf and fix dilapidated sections at Veterans Memorial Stadium.

Every occupied school in the district as well as other buildings, such as the stadium, would undergo some kind of renovations or repairs in the massive \$80.8 million three-year building plan that Erie schools Superintendent Brian Polito presented in an initial form to the Erie School Board during a nonvoting committee-of-the-whole meeting on Wednesday night.

“This is a pretty exciting night,” Polito told the board. “We are moving out of the planning phase and into the doing phase.”

Erie High would get the most work, totaling \$28 million, which would include new windows (\$3.2 million) and electrical upgrades (\$6.7 million).

The total plan, which would be put out for bid, would be financed by extending the district’s bond payments by at least another five years. The district would increase the payments by \$3 million, to \$12 million, by using budget surpluses and some of the \$14 million in the annual funding boost that the General Assembly approved a year ago to keep the district solvent.

A tax increase is also “a very strong possibility” to help pay for the plan, Polito said in an interview. Work would start in 2019 and run through 2021.

The Erie School District originally discussed a renovation plan of \$60 million, but the estimate has expanded to address more needs, School Board President Frank Petrungar Jr. said. He said the district must fix the structural problems before they worsen and become more costly. Building improvements are part of the district’s overall strategic plan, which also focuses on upgrades to programs.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” Petrungar said of the building plan after Wednesday’s meeting. “But we have to do it in the smartest and most efficient way.”

The board will review the plan further at a Dec. 1 meeting that will also include more discussions on funding options, Polito said. He said his administration developed the building plan in consultation with the district’s state-appointed financial administrator, Charles Zogby, who was at Wednesday’s meeting. The board has not yet set a date for a vote.

If the board approves the project, it would be 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 Diehl, JoAnna Connell and Harding schools.

Polito, who took office as superintendent in July 2017 after serving as the district's chief financial officer for two years, said the building plan is meant to fix longstanding structural and maintenance issues that the district has neglected for years because of funding concerns. The goal, he said, is to make the buildings "warm, safe and dry."

Many of the renovations, such as improvements to heating and ventilation systems, are behind the walls of the buildings but must be addressed sooner rather than later, Polito said. He said the changes are designed to move the district out of a reactive mode in dealing with structural problems.

"There is no more waiting" on making the repairs, Polito said. After the completion of the project, he said, every student in the 11,500-student Erie School District should be able to "experience something that every student in the county experiences: a functional building, without leaking windows, leaking roofs, heating systems that are sporadic at best."

Polito said the \$80.8 million plan represents "what the district can afford" at this point and would address the buildings' most pressing needs. The plan is also the first of what Polito said could be two phases of building renovations and repairs.

Polito said he expects to explore the second phase —which could cost as much as \$130 million — once the first phase is underway, and he said the scope and cost of the first phase are likely to change based on board input and other information. The district developed the plan with its architectural firm on the project, HHSDR, of Sharon, whose architects and structural engineers toured the district's buildings over the past several months.

"It is going to be a living document," Polito said.

But a document that carries with it a sense of urgency, said Eric Seibert, the Erie School District's director of facilities and maintenance.

“We either take it on now or we end up with bigger problems in the future,” he said of the plan for the first phase. “And this is not going to address all our needs, either.”

The ills of deferred or neglected maintenance are apparent at Collegiate Academy. The renovation plan sets aside \$9.9 million for the 244,815-square-foot building, which turned 100 a year ago.

The allocation includes \$2.25 million to repair Collegiate’s brick facade and to seal and reinforce its promenade, on the north side of the school. Over the years, water has leaked through the seams of the promenade, degrading the concrete and undermining the entire structure, which wooden beams help support.

A recent tour of the area below the promenade — an area closed to students — revealed dripping water that had pooled in several spots, including the balcony that overlooks Collegiate’s swimming pool, which is no longer in use and is not scheduled to be renovated.

The promenade above is safe, said Jim Vieira, the dean of Collegiate. But he said the constant intrusion of water, if left unchecked, will threaten the integrity of the structure. And, in Polito’s view, water dripping into a school is no longer acceptable at the Erie School District.

“We’ve gotten to the point where it has to be done,” Vieira said of the repair work. “It can’t wait any longer.”

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