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FEATURED

School board weighs renovation project

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Tom Peel / Indiana Gazette

MARION CENTER — The Marion Center Area school board has to decide whether it wants to spend about \$6.6 million or \$8.1 million for a renovation project involving its nearly 90-year-old library.

Also discussed during Monday night's meeting was a parking lot renovation, which could cost the school district an additional \$328,000 and push the total pricetag for the two projects to as much as \$8.5 million.

“We do have a very aging library facility,” Superintendent Clint Weimer said. “Most of these facilities of ours are earmarked to be renovated every 20 to 25 years. There hasn’t been any renovation on the high school library for 50 years. It was built in 1929.

“We need a new one. I just can’t tell you when the ideal time is to do it.”

Board President Gregg Sacco agreed with Weimer when it comes to determining the right timing for the project.

As it stands, it would be a big financial hit for the school district because no reimbursements are currently available through the state’s PlanCon program.

“It’s been a good 10 years since we had this discussion the last time and obviously nothing was done then,” Sacco said. “It’s tough. You’ve got to start somewhere. You’ve got to start understanding boards represent the community and they have to find it in themselves to support the project or make sure we’re OK to keep moving the way we are.

“The last time we talked about it, it was part of a school closing and total restructuring. This is different.”

Andreas N. Dometakis, vice president of HHSDR Architects/Engineers in Pittsburgh, discussed project options with the board during a 40-minute presentation.

Dometakis said one option would involve removing the 1929 section of the building and constructing a new library and eight classrooms, plus relocating the greenhouse. The estimated cost of that 14,780-square-foot project would be \$6,667,000.

The second option would include removal of the 1929 section, a new library and science classrooms and relocation of the greenhouse. That project would cost at estimated \$8,142,000 and cover 17,800 square feet.

Dometakis also briefly discussed a potential two-story plan in which the garage and greenhouse would be eliminated.

Several board members asked questions and expressed their concerns about the renovation project with Dometakis, including Charles Beatty Jr., William McMillen, Victoria Dicken and Charles Glasser.

“I don’t think we need it, but that’s up to the board,” Beatty said.

Weimer said the school district looked into renovating the high school library last year, “but it proved to be too expensive for what we would have been getting.”

For now, board members will continue to review their options and preliminary budget estimates before deciding whether to move forward with the project.

“At this point, we’re going to just stay at this and continue to look at our options and invest our monies into our capital savings,” Weimer said. “That’s all I can do as the superintendent until I get a blessing from the board that they want to move forward.

“I’m not going to stand up here and beat the drum and say now is the perfect time to do this, but we got to be committed to having a capital projects plan. Right now we just don’t have enough support for it. There’s so much unknown. We don’t know what our budget is going to be.”

As for the board, Sacco said: “I think we’re soaking it in. I don’t think these things get decided easily and I’m pretty certain there’s no right or wrong answers unless predicaments present themselves.

“There is data here for us to digest. It’s not something we have to act on tonight or next month. But at some point, this project will have to get done. We just have to decide when we want to start the process.”

Weimer said Marion Center is expected to have an operating budget of approximately \$27 million next year, but is down \$450,000 to \$500,000 in state reimbursements,

Dometakis said completion of the renovation project would take about a year.

“This project will be scrutinized and changes will be made after we meet with the board and administrators,” he said. “Really, anything could change from here on out. Nothing is concrete.”

Dometakis said the parking lot renovations would cost an estimated \$283,000, plus \$45,000 for potential addition of two light poles, handicapped parking and a walkway.

In other news Monday, the school board:

- Approved a five-year contract extension for Weimer, effective July 1, 2019, through June 30, 2024. The vote was 8-1 with Beatty voting no. Weimer will receive a 2.25 percent pay increase, which will take his salary to \$127,739 in July.

“This is where I want to be,” Weimer said. “I came back because Marion Center is a good place. I’m really trying to make a career here.”

Weimer received a three-year contract in 2016 after spending the previous six years as the principal at Apollo–Ridge High School. Prior to that, he was an assistant high school-middle school principal at Marion Center.

Weimer is a graduate of Saltsburg High School and earned a bachelor’s degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a master’s degree from St. Vincent College. He obtained his superintendent’s letter of eligibility from Edinboro University.

- Agreed to change March 15, 2019, from an emergency weather day to a regular in-session school day to compensate for a weather-related closing on Nov. 15.
- Approved the sixth-grade field trip to Washington, D.C.
- Hired Francesca Fazzini as a speech and language pathologist at a salary of \$34,000.
- Approved Glasser as Marion Center’s representative to the ARIN IU 28 board of directors.
- Accepted the retirement of Sandra Murphy, special education teacher, effective Jan, 2, 2019. She spent 20 years with the district.

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