

# Playground renovations shelved at Quakertown schools



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MILFORD TOWNSHIP, Pa. -

Playground renovations at most Quakertown area schools are being scratched from a priority list of projects that should be done this summer.

It happened Tuesday night during a meeting of Quakertown Community School Board's facilities committee, which will present its recommendations to the full board Thursday night.

Also at that Thursday meeting, the school board is expected to adopt a \$104.5 million budget for 2016-17 with a 2.4 percent tax increase. That increase will cost homeowners an average of \$94 more in real estate taxes.

On Tuesday night Kelly Harper, the school district's facilities director, presented members of the facilities committee with a building-by-building list of projects that might be done this summer.

Schradergroup Architecture, a Philadelphia-based consultant, prepared that list of "immediate need" projects for the school district. Doing them all would cost more than \$4.9 million.

"It's almost five million dollars and we don't have five million dollars to spend," said Nancianne Edwards,

the district's assistant superintendent. She said the district has only \$700,000 for such projects in the new budget for the coming 2016-17 school year.

She explained that \$700,000 will come out of the district's \$3.2 million in capital reserves.

"The purpose of tonight's meeting was for the facilities committee to review those items and give us direction about which items we should address first," said Edwards.

"We have a lot of repair and maintenance needs we need to catch up on. We haven't allocated money to do that."

"Nothing like this has been done for 40 years," said school board member Stephen Ripper, who chairs the facilities committee.

The only playground slated to get some help this summer is at Neidig Elementary. That playground was recommended for \$239,00 worth of renovations, but only \$20,000 will be spent — primarily to make safety repairs so children won't trip and fall on cracks in the macadam.

"It's not going to take \$20,000 to patch the macadam," predicted Ripper. He said some of that money also will be used to redo the wood chip area of the Neidig playground and even to repair or replace some aging playground equipment.

Other elementary schools that won't be getting renovated playgrounds this summer, despite their immediate need ranking because of poor condition, include Trumbauersville, Tohickon Valley, Richland, Quakertown and Pfaff. Those playground projects range in estimated costs from \$195,000 to \$300,000 each.

"With everything else that's going on, we don't think we should concentrate on playgrounds," said school board president Paul Stepanoff, who serves on the facilities committee.

He expressed concern about how approving playground projects "would look from a political point of view." He suggested people would question why playgrounds are the most important things the district is spending money on.

In addition to adding new play equipment, Edwards explained needed playground renovations include improving the play areas. "You want at least 12 inches of mulch in order to provide cushioning for safety reasons," she said. "Over time, the mulch compacts and no longer provides a cushion." She said mulch surfaces at the elementary school playgrounds "are not unsafe, but not ideal."

She added as old equipment breaks or becomes dangerous to use because of broken parts, it is removed from playgrounds, but not replaced. "Over time, you really have a deterioration of students' play areas."

The biggest single summer project approved by the facilities committee is replacing all HVAC controls in

Strayer Middle School, at an estimated cost of \$475,000. School district officials explained temperatures in different parts of that school building now fluctuate dramatically, sometimes as much as 30 degrees.

“Strayer is a huge school,” noted Harper. “We can’t even qualify the total number of controllers we’re talking about.” He indicated getting that project completed by the time school starts will be a challenge.

Because of previous problems the district has had with work done by HVAC contractors, Stepanoff suggested including a performance guarantee in a new contract and holding back at least 10 to 20 percent of the total cost “until we get through a heating season.”

If the full \$475,000 isn’t needed for that Strayer project, old HVAC controls also may be replaced in the Freshman Center. Doing that work has an estimated cost of \$125,000.

Stepanoff suggested the district might save money by hiring one contractor to do both the Strayer and Freshman Center HVAC projects.

Other projects at Neidig Elementary this summer will include roof drain repairs (\$20,000), HVAC replacements (\$25,000) and interior patching and painting (\$2,265).

Harper said some downspouts carrying rain water off roofs at Neidig now end at the building’s foundation. “I’m surprised we’re not having sinkholes.”

Also scheduled to be done this summer are geothermal piping repairs at Pfaff Elementary. Harper explained that geothermal system handles both heat and air conditioning for the school. “If that’s down, the whole building has no heat or air conditioning.”

He explained four district schools have geothermal systems, which use the ground as a heat exchanger to disperse heat in summer and help draw warmth into buildings in winter.

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Harper said that repair project is budgeted at \$20,000, but warned that cost could be as high as \$200,000. “That’s a perfect example of why we have a contingency fund,” said Stepanoff. “If we find out something is wrong, that’s when we draw out money.”

“Ideally, it could be \$20,000 and done,” said Harper. “There’s an 85 percent chance that it’s only going to be \$20,000.”

Edwards said the school board formally will approve all this summer’s projects when its approves contracts for the work.

"We want to prioritize the things that improve the student experience," she said, adding: "Everything on the list is important."

Edwards noted: "We really only have the summers to do the bigger projects, because most of those projects can't be done when students are in school."

School board member Robert Smith, who also serves on the committee, said the Schradergroup list gives the district a jump start on projects that will be done in the summer of 2017.

Stepanoff said the first priority on the list for the summer of '17 should be redoing the Freshman Center parking lot, at an estimated cost of \$430,000. "That requires engineering."

Another big project Stepanoff said will be done next year is renovating restrooms at Richland Elementary, including making them handicapped accessible, at a total estimated cost of \$165,000. School officials explained that restrooms project also will require engineering work before improvements are made. "There wouldn't be time to do them this summer," said Edwards.

Another big project that needs to be done is \$61,875 to replace worn gym bleachers at the Freshman Center. That also is not budgeted for this summer.

Harper said the district's insurance company has determined those old and cracked bleachers are "not satisfactory." He said that doesn't mean they must be replaced this summer, but does mean the district should prepare "an action plan" stating when they will be replaced.

Stepanoff recommending spending up to \$1.5 million on "immediate need" programs in the summer of 2017. He indicated projects involving student safety should be the top priority, adding: "And we start getting into playgrounds after all the other stuff has been done."

But Ripper stressed: "Obviously, we are going to address any safety issues in playgrounds."

Ripper noted some of the district's schools may be closing in a couple of years, "so why put big money into a building that you're going to close?"

He said some of those schools are 50 years old and need \$10 million worth of work.

Edwards explained Schradergroup was paid \$31,000 to do both a comprehensive engineering study of all the district's buildings and also help develop a 10-year facilities master plan.

Schradergroup has been advising a community committee appointed by the school board. That committee recommended a district master plan to the board on April 28, after evaluating all the buildings in the district.

That plan recommends building a new elementary school and middle school, "with shared core

facilities,” on 123 acres the district purchased last year along West Pumping Station Road. The estimated cost of those buildings would be \$66.4 million.

Other master plan recommendations are:

- \* Sell Tohickon Valley Elementary School and Milford Middle School.
- \* Sell or donate Haycock Elementary School.
- \* Maintain Quakertown Elementary as the district-wide Kindergarten Center.
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