

Fate of Quakertown elementary uncertain as district considers facilities' plan

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, May 24, 2016 11:45 pm

Quakertown Elementary School, a historic building constructed in 1928, may not be worth saving as the district considers proposals to upgrade its facilities.

The Community Facilities Study Committee, comprised of district residents and administrators, suggested turning the school into a district-wide kindergarten center as part of a \$112.1 million plan. But Tuesday night, in the second of four meetings between the committee and school officials to prioritize work, the future of Quakertown Elementary appeared far from certain.

"That's a surprising result," school board President Paul Stepanoff said of the committee's proposal. While complimenting their 10 months of work, saying "I see a plan with a tremendous amount of thought," Stepanoff also said that closing schools is a normal process.

The school, which serves kindergarten through fifth grades, has about 270 students, most of them walkers. A switch to kindergarten only, would bump up the number to well over 300 students from all over the district.

"You'd be having all of these parents showing up at literally our worst school (building). There's no way in, no way out (because of the traffic). We're forcing parents to be there either morning, afternoon or midday. We're going to have an increased amount of traffic."

He suggested a traffic study.

A parent on the audience agreed with Stephanoff, saying "QE should be closed. Practicality has to take over. I think that needs to be seriously looked at."

The decision was one of 19 options presented by the committee to the school board for a facilities master plan. It was not unanimous, according to Becky Smith, a committee member. She said some people felt that as the only school in Quakertown it should be saved.

Under the plan, Tohickon Valley Elementary and Milford Middle School would close. A new elementary/middle school with a shared gymnasium and cafeteria would be built on West Pumping Station Road. The school would cost \$66 million, minus the money collected from the sales of Tohickon and Milford.

Stepanoff said Tuesday night a developer is interested in the Tohickon property.

The report also advises establishing ongoing annual investment to catch up on repairs and capital improvements. Nancianne Edwards, the district's assistant superintendent, said Tuesday the district

plans on using \$700,000 from its \$3.25 million Capital Reserve Fund in next year's budget.

That's a far cry from the \$66 million of needed upgrades to get the buildings up to code, according to a study by the Schrader Group, an architectural firm paid \$31,532 to evaluate the district's facilities. Edwards, however, said it's already too late to start work this summer for projects that haven't been approved. And the board still must prioritize the committee's recommendations.

The schools most in need of work are Quakertown Elementary (\$13.6 million), Tohickon Valley (\$10.9 million), Milford Middle School (\$10.9 million) and Neidig Elementary (\$10.4 million).

The schools' HVAC systems are running out of steam, need new roofs, floor replacement, work to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards and building code upgrades among several other items. In the meantime, the high school is in the midst of a \$72 million renovation project.

Director Stephen Ripper, chairman of the Facilities Committee, said he was pushing back the next two Community Facilities Study Committee meetings as board members needed to digest the committee's recommendations.

The Facilities Committee will be meeting Tuesday, and the report will be part of the agenda.