

Report calls for Quakertown to close schools as part of \$112.1M plan

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Thursday, April 28, 2016 11:30 pm

The Quakertown Community School District should close two schools, build a combination elementary/middle school and renovate three others as part of an overhaul to guide work on the district's facilities for the next decade.

The recommendation was given to the school board Thursday night by the Community Facilities Study Committee, which has been working on the 62-page report for nine months.

The committee developed 19 options for a facilities master plan. The one they agreed upon, which includes turning Quakertown Elementary School into a district-wide kindergarten center, would cost \$112.1 million.

The price tag was "right in the middle" of all options, which range between \$106 million and more than \$120 million, said committee member Stephanie Zajkowski.

She reminded the board and an audience of more than 50 residents that the district has been mulling \$66 million of work on its buildings, "just to bring the schools up to code, not adding additional space and options that we need."

Josh Sinsel, another committee member, said the "Band-Aid approach" the district has been using "is ultimately more costly ... and not a viable option."

Tohickon Valley Elementary and Milford Middle School would close and be sold under the plan. 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, part of the overall \$112.1 million cost, minus the money collected from the sales of Tohickon and Milford.

The report also advises establishing an ongoing annual investment to catch up on the repairs and capital improvements to district facilities.

Sandi Frisch of the committee said there would be no changes to the District Services Center, home to administrative offices, as "capital spending should be reserved for student spaces."



(File) Quakertown School District administration building on Commerce Boulevard

As the committee visited all district schools, she cited several disparities that prevent "equitable educational experiences."

Zajkowski said some older schools that have not been well maintained were forced to use storage closets, nurses' offices and corridors for small group instruction. In one school with three bathroom stalls, "if one of the stalls is working you're having a good day."

The top four sites of the 13 buildings 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).

Each of the those schools' HVAC systems are running out of steam, need a new roof, floor replacement, work to meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards and building code upgrades, among several other items.

According to school officials, the buildings deteriorated over time as the district failed to pay enough attention to its properties.

"We have kicked the can down the road for several decades," Superintendent William Harner recently said. "But now we have no excuse and have to fix the buildings."

Nancianne Edwards, the district's assistant superintendent, said the report is "a tremendous amount of information to digest." She praised the committee for taking "a whole community view."