

Quakertown schools need \$65 million in fixes

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer | Posted: Saturday, February 20, 2016 6:00 am

In the midst of a \$72 million high school renovation, the Quakertown Community School District is also in the process of figuring out how to handle \$65 million of work needed at its other buildings.

The numbers were recently presented to the school board by the Schrader Group, an architectural firm paid \$31,532 to evaluate the district's facilities.

"We're not going to spend \$65 million at one time," said Charles Shermer, the board's vice president. "We certainly have some decisions to make going forward."

And figuring out how to pay the tab will be part of it.

"Whether we take it out of budget savings or add more to the budget going forward has yet to be determined," he said. "You can certainly float bonds for capital assets. These are all things we have to take a look at. We just have to follow through and protect the community's investment."

The top four sites of the 13 buildings in need of work are Quakertown Elementary (\$11.3 million), Tohickon Valley Elementary (\$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," said Superintendent William Harner, who was hired in April 2014. "But now we have no excuse and have to fix the buildings."

Nancianne Edwards, the district's assistant superintendent, said with "difficult economic circumstances" in recent years "nobody wants to cut spending in areas that directly impact students. That's our core mission. Things like regular maintenance and repairs are often the first things cut. You don't want to do things to negatively impact programs and children."

So roofs have been "nursed along for another year" and parking lots "in terrible condition" have gone without repaving.

To help figure out its next steps, the board appointed a committee of community members and district officials who meet each week and have toured district facilities.

"It's a very transparent and community-oriented process," Edwards said.

Harner said giving residents decision-making power "creates tremendous buy-in."

In the next several weeks the committee will come back to the board with options on how to move forward.

Shermer, an engineer by trade, said he's been following the district's budget process since moving back to the area in 2007. "There hasn't been a whole lot of money going into maintenance and facilities," he said.

Appointed to the board in August 2013, Shermer put the capital projects issue "on my plate shortly after I got here," Harner said.

He "accepted the challenge and basically executed a really good plan by involving the community," Shermer said. "Right now we're in a triage with things we've got to do. We're in the process of developing a consistent plan to manage the community's assets.

"You want to make sure kids and teachers have a safe and healthy work environment. A nice building is comfortable and promotes learning. You don't have to have a Taj Mahal, but it's got to be safe and up-to-date.

"They need to be maintained like a house. You have to get out of the emergency, break, fix mode, and we're about to do that."