Quakertown takes long-range view in school planning process

By Gary Weckselblatt, staff writer  Jan 17, 2017

The Quakertown Community School Board and area residents got their first look at development plans for new elementary and middle schools in Milford Township that won't be built until after the next presidential election.

The 126 acres, which the district purchased in 2015 for nearly $1.8 million, is just across from East Swamp Church, at the intersection of West Pumping Station Road, and behind the Target store, which is just off state Route 309.

"This is going to be an extensive process," Superintendent William Harner said. "It'll be 18 to 24 months before a road is developed and four years until we have a school."

It's all part of a $134 million master plan, spread out over 13 years for affordability, to build two new schools and renovate several others.

School officials explained that after years of neglect to its buildings, the district has a long list of capital projects. Most of the heavy lifting was done last year by a Community Facilities Study Committee, a group of residents, board members and administrators who toured schools, reviewed data and came up with several options.

Its recommendation was a $66 million plan that would have made the aging buildings safe, warm and dry, but not add seats to a district deficient by 227 seats at the elementary and middle school levels.

Rather than spending $45 million of that money on Neidig, Quakertown and Tohickon elementaries and Milford Middle School, the board voted in November on the $134 million master plan.

The goal is to have a $46.6 million, 600-student elementary school built by 2021 while a $19.8 million renovation of Neidig Elementary School is underway. That will give officials time to determine other projects, including what to do with Quakertown Elementary, a historic building from 1928.

According to a timeline developed by Schrader Group Architecture, after the West Pumping Station Road school is built and Neidig renovations begin, a $36.6 million middle school would be alongside the new elementary school and share several components, including a cafeteria, gymnasium and auditorium.

It's scheduled for completion in 2029.

Tohickon Valley Elementary School and Milford Middle School, which each need nearly $11 million in renovations, would be closed. They have been appraised for nearly $2.2 million combined and could be sold or leased.

School board President Paul Stepanoff said "This is the first time the board has a vision that goes a decade into the future."

Officials anticipate that with the Lehigh Valley Health Network opening a medical center on Route 309 and West Pumping Station Road and the expansion of the St. Luke's health facility on state Route 663 more families will be attracted to the area.

"There will be a dramatic change of the demographics in our community," Harner said. "Better paying jobs will bring in a lot more young people."

QCSD has about 5,400 students today, and officials say if enrollment projections change, they will have the ability to respond accordingly.

"It will be critical for all parties to work together," said school director Stephen Ripper, chairman of the Facilities Committee. "This is an opportunity that hasn't happened in the past too often. We have to make sure we get the input from different parties and alleviate some long existing problems here."

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