

Lewiston-Auburn

Trends toward school choice could benefit Auburn, consultant tells council



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AUBURN — A refurbished Edward Little High School might be able to take advantage of trends toward open enrollment and charter schools, according to school consultant Mike McCormick.

McCormick, a consultant hired to help draw up a facilities master plan for Auburn schools, outlined his work so far to a combined meeting Monday night of the Auburn City Council and the Auburn School Committee.

McCormick said his work is pointing Auburn toward a single campus for most of the city's students, kindergarten through senior high. He suggested the City Council and school officials create a committee to continue developing the idea further and plan for a community straw vote this November.

McCormick said the state is taking steps toward school choice and allowing students to select which public schools they attend. That includes allowing charter schools.

"There are 41 other states that offer school choice today," he said. "The school districts that are able to fund school choice and make it happen are going to steal your best students."

McCormick said there is no way of knowing what funding models the state might eventually adopt for students who attend public schools in another community.

"But we have to assume that they are going to come with some dollars," he said.

Instead of letting the city's best students be lured away, Auburn could get ahead of the game and lure good students in from surrounding towns.

"Here's an opportunity for Auburn," he said. "I'm not encouraging you to do that, but I am encouraging you to look into it and seeing what the advantages could be. You could become a receiving school district. That would mean you could offer the best programs in the state. And I think

every school should try to be the best in the state."

But first, the city needs to do something with the schools it has.

McCormick said Auburn has underfunded school capital work by about \$1 million each year since 1998. McCormick said the schools have put off about \$56 million in capital improvements — with another \$33 million accruing over the next 20 years.

That's most obvious at Edward Little High School, which is currently on academic probation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. In 2009, that group surveyed the building and found 41 major problems with the facility, including small classroom sizes, mold and air quality problems and failing boilers.

Estimates have shown a major renovation of Edward Little High School could cost \$49 million. Building a new high school could cost \$61 million. Attempts to get state construction money have not been successful so far.

The single-campus plan calls for building a replacement Edward Little High School on some site with local taxpayer money, and no help from the state.

"You need to be thinking about the future of education," he said. "You are at the point where what you do will have a huge impact on all the schools for many, many years. You can fix up what you have or you have the opportunity to create something new that is going to be more adaptable for the future.

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