



Auburn's 'mega-campus' idea gets green light

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AUBURN — The Auburn School Committee voted Wednesday to accept and move forward with a plan to put all of the city's schools on one big campus.

The committee voted 6–1 to accept a recommendation from the Master Facilities Planning Committee to look for a site with enough land to build all schools — from prekindergarten to high school — at one location. City Councilor David Young, the mayor's representative on the School Committee, voted against the plan.

The first phase of the single-campus plan, which would take seven years if approved by voters, would be to build a new Edward Little High School on that site with local taxpayer money. Attempts to get state construction money have not been successful.

A straw vote on that would likely be held in November 2012, Superintendent Katy Grondin said.

Next: A committee will be assembled to oversee phase one of the single campus/new high school plan.

One citizen blasted the idea.

Former School Committee member Elliott Epstein called the single-campus plan “the most ridiculous thing to come down the pike,” “silly,” and a waste of time. He predicted it would be “whacked” by voters when it got to referendum.

Everyone agrees Edward Little High School needs a lot of work, Epstein said. Estimates have shown a major renovation would cost \$49 million; a new school, \$61 million.

“That's a lot of money,” Epstein said. “If you're talking about a single-campus plan, you're automatically committing yourself to a very large expenditure for the high school right now.”

He asked whether the plan was a concrete one, or something to be discarded if a future committee concludes it makes no sense.

Committee member Tom Kendall said the plan “is where we believe our education should go,” that it's “our best thinking on the direction we should be heading.”

Epstein said he would volunteer to be on the phase one committee. “Otherwise, I'll hear about the plan at the end of the day, and I'm going to have that gag reflex I have when a particularly silly plan is put forth.”

School Committee member Lane Feldman pointed out that the committee changed its vote from supporting the recommendation to only accepting it.

"I don't like it," Feldman said. "I don't want my child going to a mega-campus."

But he respects the planning work and said the city has to move forward. "We all know we need a high school," he said. "If that's as far as we get, I'm happy."

Retired educator Alfreda Fournier said a new high school "is paramount," and putting the high school and middle school together "is a wonderful idea."

Fournier volunteered to serve on the phase one committee representing retired citizens. It's important, she said, that the committee represent neighborhood schools that could be closed under the mega-campus proposal.

In presenting the Master Facilities Planning Committee recommendation, hired consultant Mike McCormick said Auburn's enrollment of 3,600 would grow by a half-percent per year for the next 20 years. By 2031, Auburn students will number more than 4,000, he said.

Looking at the physical needs of Auburn schools, he said the city is millions of dollars behind what it should have spent in maintenance and upkeep. The high school's heating system is poor, it has mold problems and poor air quality. The school lacks science labs and a standard cafeteria, and it needs more room for programs. Due to its physical condition, Edward Little is on academic probation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

McCormick said the city is spending beneath the state average for education and has deferred \$56 million worth of needed school building improvements.

The current debt-service ratio for Auburn, including school debt, is 3.56 percent, he said. "There is fiscal capacity," McCormick said. "Auburn could locally fund the recommendations of this committee."

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Consultant Mike McCormick presents to the School Committee on Wednesday night the Master Facilities Committee recommendation to create a huge, single-site campus that would eventually hold all Auburn schools.

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