

District wants \$6 million loan for school upgrades

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Board OKs borrowing for project list that calls for bolstering security, repairing buildings, revamping athletic facilities

Grafton school officials are proceeding with plans to begin upgrading district facilities this spring, including bolstering security measures in all buildings.

The School Board on Monday passed a resolution authorizing the borrowing of up to \$6 million to pay for capital improvements that range from repairing walls and roofs and replacing windows to upgrading fire alarm systems and securing entrances.

The projects, identified in a facilities study by Plunkett Raysich Architects, are on a list of upgrades the district plans to complete in 2013 and 2014. Among the top priorities are installing security cameras and buzzer-lock entrances at all buildings, a step hastened in response to the Dec. 14 shooting tragedy in Newtown, Conn.

Grafton High School is the only district building that currently has security cameras. Plans call for internal and external cameras to be installed in the other five buildings — Grafton, Kennedy and Woodview elementary schools, John Long Middle School and the district office — along with buzzer locks in all buildings.

The new lock system will prevent visitors from entering a building unless a door is opened electronically by an employee inside.

The new security upgrades are expected to cost \$200,000 to \$300,000. That total is significantly less than a more comprehensive option in the facilities study that calls for remodeling entrances and could cost as much as \$1.8 million.

Supt. Jeff Pechura said he and other district officials believe the cameras and buzzer-lock entrances are much-needed upgrades that will improve security at a reasonable cost.

“There are other options in the plan, but we’re taking a less-expensive approach that will still tighten security,” Pechura said. “We feel that this approach will make our schools safer and be more affordable.”

Work on some of the upgrades, including enhanced security, is expected to begin this spring, Pechura said.

In preparation for the capital improvements plan, the district last year hired Plunkett Raysich to complete the facilities study. In prioritizing upgrade options, the district chose projects expected to cost more than \$6.6 million.

Major expenditures in this year’s work, which totals \$3.29 million, include \$850,000 for new football bleachers; \$660,000 for tuck-pointing repairs at the high school; \$450,000 to replace and insulate the roof at Woodview School; \$250,000 for high school pool repairs; \$179,000 to

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repair walls on four buildings; \$120,000 for new soccer bleachers and fencing; and \$112,000 to replace plumbing fixtures at Woodview School.

Topping a \$3 million expenditures list for 2014 are two projects at Grafton Elementary School: \$650,000 to repipe the heating system and \$550,000 to replace heating/air conditioning ventilators.

Next year's upgrades also include \$200,000 to upgrade the fire system at the high school; \$135,000 to replace windows and repair window seals at Woodview School; and \$120,000 to replace the high school athletic track and for electrical upgrades to the track infield.

The board approved the priority list at the recommendation of the district's administrative team.

Plans call for the district to defray \$647,750 of project costs by using its fund balance and other fund transfers. Pechura noted that favorable bids from contractors could also pare the cost.

Based on proposed financing plans, taxpayers could expect to pay at least 26 cents per \$1,000 of equalized valuation more each year for the upgrades. However, the increase would also depend on other budgetary factors, including the district's total property value.

Under state statutes, school districts can authorize borrowing to pay for maintenance and capital improvement projects, including safety, security and technology improvements and buying furnishings, fixtures and equipment.

Once Grafton's resolution is published Feb. 28, district residents will have 30 days to file a petition challenging the board's decision and require a referendum to be held. The petition must be signed by at least 20% of district residents who voted for governor in the last general election.

If no petition is filed, the borrowing resolution will go into effect without a referendum.

"We're not expecting any challenges, but stranger things have happened," Pechura said.

"Every 10 to 15 years, school districts have a site and facilities study done. We've looked at this one very carefully and identified areas where improvements need to be made. We want to move forward with this."

The last time the district undertook major building and technology upgrades was 2000, when voters passed a \$16.4 million referendum.

The resolution to borrow \$6 million was recommended by the district's Finance Committee. Plans call for the administration to begin working with financial consultants and legal counsel to secure general obligation bonds as soon as possible after the 30-day petition period ends.

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