

District signs off on \$12,000 schools study

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV

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Committee endorses buildings and grounds analysis that could result in sweeping recommendations

A Port Washington-Saukville School Board committee on Monday endorsed a plan to pay a well-known architectural firm at least \$12,000 to study the district's buildings and grounds and make recommendations that could range from relatively straightforward maintenance to building additions and new schools.

Bray Architects, a firm that specializes in school buildings and designed Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Port Washington, will conduct what administrators are calling the first study of its kind in the district.

"The best we can tell, this will be the first comprehensive study the district has done," Supt. Michael Weber said. "There have been studies that have taken a look at specific areas, but this study will take a look at everything with an eye toward future planning."

The committee's endorsement of the contract with Bray Architects is in keeping with a decision by the School Board earlier this month to hire the firm and cap the cost of the study at \$15,000.

Bray will charge a flat fee of \$12,000, with an optional "community engagement" component that would cost an additional \$1,000. This phase would include providing opportunities for residents to have input in the process, communicating with staff members, parents and "friends" of the district and documenting "community engagement efforts," according to Bray's proposal.

Work on the study could begin this week and is expected to take three months to complete.

"It seems like a good value for a lot of information gathered over a short period of time," board member Kimberly Wood said.

The study was prompted in part by the fact that, with the addition of a 10th section of kindergarten this year, Lincoln and Dunwiddie elementary schools are at capacity.

Port Washington High School, a conglomeration of buildings dating to 1931 that is situated on an ideally located but tiny parcel by high school standards, is also a concern.

"We have immediate space issues that will result in some recommendations, fairly extensive ones for the high school and Lincoln and Dunwiddie," Weber said.

The study will examine all six of the district's buildings, including Saukville Elementary

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School, which with its open concept continues to vex administrators.

“We have some ideas about how we can maintain the pod concept with shared educational space but provide better security,” Weber said. “It would be a semi-open concept.”

Among the more immediate needs are the roofs of school buildings.

“We’ve done a good job of extending the lives of our roofs, but we know we can only do that for so long, and we know they are expensive to replace,” Weber said.

The study will also examine outdoor spaces, including the amount of land dedicated to athletic facilities. Administrators note the district has made do with the land it has by, for instance, locating the aquatic center and high school soccer field at the middle school, but said its sports venues are overtaxed.

“The city rec department and community groups use our facilities a lot, and we’re already pressed for athletic space,” Weber said.

It will be important, he said, to receive input from parent groups, including one at the high school that has already expressed concern about athletic facilities.

“We need input from the community,” he said. “People have not been shy about saying things to me already, and that’s a good thing.”

The finished study is to become the basis for a comprehensive plan that will prioritize the district’s needs, some of which will require immediate attention while others may not have to be addressed for years.

Regardless of the timing, it’s likely the study will spark a dialog about significant investments in the district’s infrastructure and referendums needed to secure funding for them.

The district last referendum was in 2002. It currently has no referendum debt.

School officials note the undertaking is substantial and said they are confident Bray Architects is the best firm to handle not only the study but perhaps much of the work that results from its recommendations.

“Some school districts go into a project like this by hiring separate firms to study, design and present projects to the community,” Weber said. “With Bray, that’s not necessary. They already have all that experience.”

Bray, which has offices in Sheboygan and Milwaukee, will also be tasked with completing a demographic analysis that seeks to shed light on future enrollment.

“The last time we sat down with the city to talk about development, VK was still around,” Weber said, referring to Brookfield development company VK Homes, which proposed a

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sprawling, upscale subdivision on the city's south side. The company has since lost much of the undeveloped land to foreclosure.

“Now we're very curious to see how that's all changed and how other developments in both the city and the village (of Saukville) will impact the district,” Weber said. “This will be very interesting.”