

# GREENFIELD RECORDER

Orange committee to talk new school's name, budget at meeting



The proposed addition/renovation to Fisher Hill Elementary School in Orange. Courtesy image/HILL INTERNATIONAL INC.

By DAVID McLELLAN

Staff Writer

Published: 12/31/2019 11:15:29 PM

Modified: 12/31/2019 11:15:11 PM

**ORANGE** — What should the next elementary school in Orange be called? And how much will it cost (or, how much will taxpayers be willing to back)?

These key questions related to Orange's school building project will be discussed at the upcoming School Building Committee meeting Thursday at 6:15 p.m. at Ralph C. Mahar Regional School.

Orange has received state support for its plan to build a three-story addition onto Fisher Hill Elementary School (for preschool through second grade), demolish the adjacent Dexter Park Innovation School (for grades three through six), and put all of its elementary school students in the renovated and expanded building.

The project was estimated at \$66,796,842 — with up to 80 percent of eligible costs being reimbursed by the Massachusetts School Building Authority — when MSBA allowed the proposal to advance into the design phase Dec. 11.

However, School Building Committee Chair Bruce Scherer emphasized Friday that the project is continuously evolving in terms of cost and specific details, and cautioned against “getting ahead of ourselves.”

“The school building program is changing as it goes forward,” he said.

The proposed school is in the “schematic design phase,” but the plan is to have a new drive installed to improve traffic flow, as well as expanded and age-specific play areas outside.

Also, the school is to include an “innovation hub,” a central location in the building that includes science and art rooms, a library, media center and patio for outdoor lessons in one connected space. The innovation hub has been praised in previous meetings by educators as a versatile and visible area that can evolve over the building's proposed 50-year lifespan to reflect modern education approaches.

Other aspects of the school include a stringent security layout, with visitors unable to enter locked educational areas, and special education classrooms dispersed throughout.

The cost of the school is dependent on materials, window sizes, sidewalk or road widths (to include a bike lane), and the numerous other specifics yet to be determined, explained Martin Goulet of Hill International Inc., the company managing the project on behalf of the town.

“We’re trying to do some budget cutting,” Scherer said. “And there will be some new information on the playgrounds. ... With a playground, you don’t think it’s expensive, but it can be.

“A million here, a million there and, before you know it, we’re talking real money,” Scherer added. “We will be looking at ways we can lower the current (estimated cost).”

Also expected at Thursday’s meeting will be architects from Raymond Design Associates, known as RDA, the company designing the school.

Orange’s school project will not be a reality unless voters accept the proposal — and funding the town’s share of the project through borrowing — at the 2020 Annual Town Meeting in June. If it passes, construction would take about two years, starting from 2021 and using “phased construction” that occurs during the school year and summer.

The need for a new school building has been apparent since at least 2006, when the Massachusetts School Building Authority designated the school as “Category 4,” the worst possible rating.

Problems with the school’s boiler and heating system, a leaking roof and opaque windows were coupled with overcrowding since Butterfield School, then the town’s third elementary school, closed in 2015.

The goal of the project has always been to improve or replace Dexter Park, but Fisher Hill is where the future building will sit, so the name of the proposed school is unclear.

As with the cost of the project, Scherer said the name of the school is just being discussed, and the public should not expect the committee to choose a name Thursday.

“It’s not like we’re going to be deciding anything,” he said.

Scherer said Orange residents will “absolutely” be able to weigh in on the name, and at least two more public outreach sessions will be scheduled to receive input on the name and the project as a whole.

“Whether it will just be renamed or become Fisher Hill School, I don’t know,” he said.

Reach David McLellan at [dmclellan@recorder.com](mailto:dmclellan@recorder.com) or 413-772-0261, ext. 268.