

# GREENFIELD RECORDER

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## State moves forward with Orange school project



By DAVID McLELLAN  
Staff Writer

ORANGE — The town is another step closer to building one elementary school for all its students, now that the state has decided to move forward with the proposed building.

The Massachusetts School Building Authority's board of directors held its December meeting Wednesday morning. On the agenda was Orange's school building project, and the authority approved the basic proposal, officially moving the project into the "schematic design phase."

"Thanks to our collaborative work with local officials, we are working to build a 21st-century educational facility that will provide Orange students with a top-notch learning environment," said Deborah B. Goldberg, state treasurer.

The plan is to build a three-story addition onto Fisher Hill Elementary School — for students in preschool through second grade — demolish the adjacent Dexter Park Innovation School — for grades three through six — and move all students into the expanded Fisher Hill.

The existing parts of the Fisher Hill building will undergo renovation, and new playing fields — including age-specific areas for younger students — will be installed on the campus. A new drive to improve traffic circulation, including separate areas for buses and parents dropping off, is also part of the plan.

According to the Massachusetts School Building Authority, the project is currently estimated to cost \$66,796,842. The state will reimburse the town for up to 80 percent of the project cost. However, architects at recent School Building Committee meetings have said the real reimbursement will likely be closer to 70 percent — the October estimate was 72 percent — because the state only reimburses "eligible" expenses, and Orange will pay for anything extra, what the state deems non-essential.

Architects have repeatedly stressed that the estimated cost of the project will fluctuate as decisions are made about specific design details, such as materials and window sizes.

The project is ultimately dependent on voters' approval at the 2020 Annual Town Meeting, held in June, and Orange would borrow money to pay for expenses not reimbursed by the state.

"The next step is for the MSBA to work in collaboration with the district to produce detailed designs for a potential project," said Massachusetts School Building Authority spokesperson Maria Puopolo in a statement.

Upon completion, Puopolo said the building will be 102,160 square feet and service 520 students in preschool through sixth grade, district-wide.

Wednesday's decision is the result of a year-long collaborative process between the town's School Building Committee and other officials; Raymond Design Associates, the architects designing the school; and Hill International Inc., the company managing the project on behalf of the town.

Beginning in February, architects conducted a study examining potential options to replace Dexter Park, including resurrecting the closed Butterfield School or building a new school entirely, perhaps next to the Ralph C. Mahar Regional School.

The School Building Committee ultimately chose the addition-renovation option at Fisher Hill, touting the plan as best fitting the educational needs of students, while also being less expensive than building a new school entirely.

Educators, like Superintendent Tari Thomas and Dexter Park Principal Christopher Dodge, have said educating all students in one building will be a more efficient use of resources, and that teachers have expressed the same sentiment.

After choosing the addition-renovation option, specific features of the school were discussed. A main feature is the proposed building's "innovation hub," a central location in the school with a library, media center, science and arts areas and a patio for outdoor learning in one space.

"This is going to be the center of our school," Dodge said at October's School Building Committee meeting. "The way it's designed right now, it's really supporting independence."

Thomas said the area would be a visible place students frequently pass through, and praised its versatility, while also adding the area could be used for professional development seminars.

"If you're building a building for the next 50 to 70 years, you don't know what learning is going to look like, so you want that flexibility," Thomas said.

Focus has been given to security at the building as well, with visitors having to be buzzed in and unable to enter the locked main lobby without permission.

There are still some issues to be worked out with the building, which Raymond Design Associates' project architect Gene Raymond said will be solved as the design process continues. These issues include where to put a bike path; whether the building's roof should have solar panels; and how preschoolers and kindergartners, who are typically dropped off by parents, make it to their classrooms, which are on the other side of the building from the drop-off area. Whether the school's roof should be flat or pitched has also been discussed.

Orange's need to replace Dexter Park 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 closed in 2015 due mainly to financial reasons.

"The addition-renovation project at Dexter Park School will mean a better learning and teaching location for students and teachers," said John K. McCarthy, Massachusetts School Building Authority executive director and deputy CEO.

The school, if approved, will be built over about two years, beginning in 2021 and using "phased construction" — construction that happens during the school year as well as in the summer.

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