

Architects considering possible sites for new Orange school



Raymond Design Associates is conducting a feasibility study of Orange's elementary school, Dexter Park Innovation School, the first step in modernizing or replacing the 1955-built school. FILE PHOTO

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ORANGE — Architects are considering the Ralph C. Mahar Regional School, the Butterfield School or the current site of Dexter Park and Fisher Hill as potential locations for a new elementary school.

Thursday was the second public forum held by the School Building Committee, Hill International Inc. and architects from Raymond Design Associates on the Dexter Park building project.

Dexter Park Innovation School — Orange’s school for students in the third through sixth grades — is one of nine schools in the state with a “Category 4” grade from the Massachusetts School Building Authority. Residents voted in January last year to fund a “feasibility study” to produce options for a plan to replace or majorly renovate the school.

Dexter Park has had problems with a leaking roof, old and opaque windows and boiler problems, leading to its designation as a Category 4 school in 2006. Since 2015, the school has become overcrowded due to the closing of the Butterfield School — then Orange’s third elementary school — which was never demolished.

“This building is in severe need of upgrades,” said Martin Goulet of Hill International Inc., which is managing the project on behalf of the town. “We’re well into it. We’ve done a lot of research.”

Raymond Design Associates architect Dan Bradford presented a host of options being considered as of Thursday, focusing on three locations. The current site of Dexter Park and adjacent Fisher Hill Elementary School, Orange’s pre-K through second-grade school; the Ralph C. Mahar Regional School for middle schoolers and high schoolers and the Butterfield School are the three sites under consideration.

A new school could be a pre-K through sixth-grade school, or a replacement of Dexter Park allowing only grades three through six. RDA is still considering a major add-on or renovation at Dexter Park, too, but whatever is ultimately chosen will be at one of the three sites presented Thursday.

“It seems there’s three potential possibilities of land areas (at Mahar) that could support a new school,” said Bradford, adding that access, terrain, utilities and between 8 and 10 acres of space were criteria in choosing potential locations.

Bradford said a media center, physical education area, nurse’s suite and administration area are all musts in a new or renovated school. He also addressed the rhetorical question of “Why not Dexter Park?” as it is now, stating the current school is undersized by 39 percent.

“What’s coming out loudly in our evaluations is improving vehicular approach, both pick-up and drop-off,” Bradford said.

In February Hill International surveyed attendees at the first public forum, asking residents to list the most important things they would want in a new school.

The results, presented Thursday, showed the ten most popular features were, in order: zero-net energy efficiency; flexible building structure for future education changes; one school for pre-K through sixth grade; inclusion of a town library and playing fields; a site using natural energy sources like solar and wind power; cost efficiency; multi-use spaces open to the community; flexible infrastructure for technology; “expands students exposure to life beyond Orange” and ensuring student safety.

Many of those features fall broadly under the “guiding principles” of the project, also presented Thursday: “Warm, safe and engaging,” “sustainability,” “school as a community resource,” “flexible and adaptable,” “learning communities,” “visible learning” and “outdoor connections.”

David Stephen, who has a background as both an architect and as a teacher, from the education consulting group New Vista has been working with teachers and administrators to develop educational priorities for the project. He shared some of these Thursday.

“The classroom has to look more varied, and the school has to look more varied. It’s not just a teacher, a classroom and kids,” said Stephen, adding that the building should be a “50-year” building with adaptable classrooms to anticipate future technologies and facilitate special education students.

Stephen said “light-filled spaces” are also a priority, as well as bigger classrooms, handicap-accessibility, good air, heating and cooling, and, above all, safety. He said it would be good to have “one point of entry for the school and have it be really clear who is coming in and who is coming out, and how we can control that.”

The push to replace or repair Dexter Park began in earnest in January last year, when voters approved funds for the feasibility study taking place. The state is funding 79.5 percent of the roughly \$875,000 study, with Orange paying \$179,375.

The state, which Goulet said will fund up to 80 percent of the final project, expects to see three specific options from the architects in the next few months — Goulet and Bradford have said at least one will be a new school entirely, and another option will be a renovation.

“We will be looking at projects at Fisher Hill, we will be looking at projects at Dexter Park and we will be looking at possible projects at a new site,” Bradford said.

In September, Massachusetts School Building Authority expects the options to have been narrowed down to one. Then in January the architects would present Massachusetts School Building Authority a final schematic design, at which point the state will determine how much it will fund the project.

Residents should expect to have a clearer idea of a price tag around then, and then vote on the building project at the summer 2020 Annual Town Meeting.

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