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EDUCATION

Why the rush? Akron Public Schools facing tight timeline to make decisions on new buildings

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Key Points

APS must decide quickly on building projects so it does not lose funding.

The Akron School Board continues to review several facilities plan options.

In several options, the administration has suggested using \$20 million or \$30 million in federal stimulus money.

If the Akron Public Schools board does not make a quick decision on a long-term facilities plan, the district could lose the opportunity for a significant funding source for building projects.

The federal stimulus dollars the district received from the American Rescue Plan Act, totaling \$96 million, have to be used by September 2024. Not just planned for use, but actually spent, Board President Derrick Hall explained to an in-person crowd and an online one streaming Monday night's special board meeting to discuss the facilities options.

Building projects take time, Hall said, and if the board wants to use any chunk of those dollars to rebuild North High School, put a new school in Kenmore or renovate another facility, it has to get the ball rolling immediately.

In several options presented to the board so far, the administration has suggested using \$20 million or \$30 million in federal stimulus money, known as ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) dollars, into the new buildings.

At least 20% of the dollars have to be used to aid students' academic recovery from the pandemic, but the rest of the allotment has the flexibility to be spent on building projects.

If it waits too long, though, that money will not be available and the district could end up taking on more debt, or asking the community for a larger bond issue — or it could mean taking an entire project off the table.

Buildings like North and the Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts also have immediate needs that should be addressed if a plan to replace them is not imminent, Chief Operations Officer Stephen Thompson said. He's holding off giving the green light for millions of dollars of work that needs to be done, until he knows which buildings will be vacated in the near future.

After next school year the district will also lose the use of the former Central-Hower high school building, now owned by the University of Akron, which is ending the lease. The building currently houses the National Inventors Hall of Fame STEM High School. Students at that school take classes at the university, so they need to find a new home close to campus.

The board could vote on portions or all of the facilities options during its regular board meeting Monday, the next time they are up for discussion.

Board reviews several options for Akron school facilities

This week, the board reviewed previously presented options and looked at two new combinations of the same puzzle pieces that all seek to solve the same problems.

The kitchen-sink option, which includes new buildings for North High and a K-8 school in Kenmore, both on a fast-track timeline, costs upward of \$150 million and would require taking on about \$100 million in debt.

Other options on the table include both of those, but on different timelines, or differently sized buildings, and in some cases rely on passing a bond issue to pay for the debt. A more conservative option includes mostly repurposing existing buildings, given that the elementary schools have a combined 4,000 open seats and in theory, the district could close 12 elementary schools.

The board has not narrowed down the options, but has made several priorities known, including the need for a new North and the need for a new school in Kenmore, as well as moving Miller South and STEM High and closing a slew of older buildings.

"Continuing to fund legacy buildings is not sustainable and just shouldn't be on the table," Hall said.

All variations of the plan call for closing Pfeiffer and Firestone Park elementary schools.

Some versions of the plan called for changing Miller South from a school that serves grades four through eight to one that only has grades six through eight. Thompson explained during the meeting that was due to possible space restrictions, depending on the school's future home. If it moved into a new building in Kenmore to combine with at least one other school, the building would have to be built larger to accommodate all the current grade levels.

But the crowd Monday night made it clear that changing the grade level structure of the school is not a viable option for parents and teachers.

Public comment portion extended during Akron School Board meeting

Carly Whetsel, the PTA president for Miller South, said the school will be sad to leave its current space, but parents understand the need given the building's crumbling infrastructure. But changing the grade levels should not happen, she said.

"Fourth and fifth grade are essential to the DNA of Miller South and its proven success," Whetsel said. "Don't make them wait to invest in their talents until the sixth grade."

By the end of the meeting, several board members said they believed Miller South's grade structure should be preserved as a four through eight school.

The board suspended its usual 20-minute rule for public comment, allowing 17 people to speak over about 50 minutes. Most spoke up about Miller South and keeping it intact, with others speaking out in favor of keeping NIHF STEM Middle School in its current building.

In some of the proposed options, STEM High would take over the building currently used by STEM Middle, which is attached to the National Inventors Hall of Fame and was built for the needs of that school.

But that would uproot the middle school, which parents said did not need to happen.

Parent Keith Freund said it was important for the district's magnet schools to be accessible for all students, and keeping them in places like Miller South's current home in Sherbondy Hill and STEM Middle's downtown building were essential to addressing inequities in the city. Possibly moving both to Kenmore would be moving them away from the district's most diverse populations in West Akron and North Hill, which is gaining students, to a predominantly white neighborhood that is losing them, he said.

"Why not focus on and invest in a growing student population on the North side of town?" Freund said. "They need a school, that should be the focus of this meeting and all of these long-term things, to help out the North side of the district."

But the Kenmore neighborhood has already seen several of its schools closed over the last decade, and is fighting against the former Kenmore high school building being left vacant for long and causing additional blight in the neighborhood. Two previously closed buildings were sold and then sat long enough to be heavily vandalized and catch on fire. One has since been razed, the other still sits vacant.

Josh Gippin, the new executive director of the Kenmore Neighborhood Alliance, said he has children at both Miller South and STEM. The decisions in front of the board are not easy, he said, but he asked board members to remember that Kenmore was previously promised new buildings that never happened.

"Whatever you decide, I ask that you not disinvest in Kenmore, as has been the case throughout this whole process of building — and in Kenmore's case, not building — new schools," Gippin said. "Kenmore has suffered for it. It has torn the fabric of the community, and it would be wrong to do it to us again. So whatever you decide, include Kenmore."

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