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EDUCATION

Costs to turn Robinson CLC into NIHF STEM High have more than doubled initial estimates

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Akron Public Schools is moving forward with a plan to turn Robinson Community Learning Center from an elementary school into a high school, but it will be significantly more expensive than administrators previously estimated.

The cost to renovate the building to get it ready before students start classes this fall has climbed to \$2,182,000, up from the last public estimate given of \$500,000 to \$1 million. At the same time, the district is cutting teachers and other staff ahead of next school year to avoid a five-year financial forecast in the red.

The building is slated to become the National Inventors Hall of Fame STEM High School at Robinson CLC after the school district was unable to come to a cost-effective agreement with the University of Akron to keep STEM High at the former Central Hower High School.

The old Central Hower building has significant maintenance issues, and while the university made offers of ways the high school could stay there, they were ultimately too expensive, administrators have said.

The increase in cost to renovate Robinson is due to the tight timeline, district spokesman Mark Williamson said, as overtime pay for workers is expected to be necessary to get the project done in just two months before staff and students return at the end of July.

"The budget estimate was ours," Williamson said in a statement. "But, due to the time frame for the project being the largest component of the price of the project, the contractor found it necessary to present us with a higher estimate."

It's also a large challenge to convert an elementary school to a high school, especially a specialty school like STEM that has extensive needs for advanced science classrooms.

Equipping a kindergarten classroom for high school chemistry requires a substantial rework of electrical and plumbing systems, Williamson said, along with adding lab elements like fume hoods. Some areas of the building need upgraded power to accommodate the new school.

To move STEM High to Robinson, the school board had to vote to close Robinson as an elementary school, rezoning students to David Hill and Mason community learning centers, keeping them within the East cluster of schools but breaking up the school that has been in operation since 2008.

As district officials weighed options of where to put STEM High, Robinson was the cheapest option at the time, with a maximum estimated cost of \$1 million. Other options topped \$20 million, including purchasing and renovating the former Morley Health Center building.

The board voted at the end of March to close Robinson.

Even at over \$2 million, the Robinson renovation is still likely the cheapest option, and it helps solve another problem: too much vacant space in elementary schools. If a building is significantly underutilized, a charter school operator could claim the right to obtain the building and open a charter school there.

The district has hired Hasenstab Architects Inc. to design the project and Cavanaugh Building Corporation to complete the renovation in just eight weeks.

The school board passed a resolution Monday night declaring an "urgent necessity," which allows the district to seek bids for only 10 days instead of the required 30 days, per state statute. Cavanaugh was the only bidder, Executive Director of Business Affairs Deb Foulk said.

"We met all the other statutes," Foulk said.

The board did not question the increased cost.

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