

West Deptford BOE Still Talking Infrastructure Improvements after Grant Award

The district has been approved for state grant dollars that would pay 60 percent of the \$7.4 million proposed project.

Posted by [Matt Skoufalos](#) (Editor) , December 15, 2013 at 08:01 PM



Significant upgrades to the West Deptford High School infrastructure are among several necessary improvements recommended by district advisors. Credit: Bryan Littel.

In October, the West Deptford Board of Education hosted a walk-through of its facilities in advance of a discussion about how much it would cost to implement those improvements.

Last week, the district got word that it had been awarded \$2.975 million towards the \$7.439 million cost of the project, part of some \$103M in grant disbursements to schools in Gloucester, Salem, and Cumberland counties.

"It's great news that we got those grants," said Superintendent Kevin Kitchenman, but in order to receive those funds, however, the district has 18 months to demonstrate that it can acquire the other 60 percent of the cost of the project.

The board is discussing financing options that could include a budget increase or a public referendum, Kitchenman said, but any official action will not take place until its new members are sworn in after the new year.

"I'm getting a new board on January 6," Kitchenman said. "It wouldn't be fair of the outgoing board to make that decision and then saddle the new board with that."

'It is all work that needs to be done'

The most important thing to note, Kitchenman said, is that none of the improvements are "pie in the sky" requests.

"Our engineer that the board hires annually and our facilities manager put that list together," he said. "In their professional estimate, it is all work that needs to get done; there's no question that the [football] field itself needs work.

"The next step is going to be a final decision as to how do we finance these things," Kitchenman said, "and if it is going to be a referendum what do we include and what don't we include."

If the board decides to not pursue a referendum, Kitchenman said, all the grant-funding-approved projects that were approved for grant funding are also eligible for debt service financing, Kitchenman said.

To qualify for the funds awarded under the grant, the district would only have to announced that it is organizing a referendum for the remaining 60 percent. If it opts to fund the improvements through debt service, taxpayers will pay a higher amount, but the district will earn 40 percent of it back over the life of the loan.

"It's still 40 percent, but instead of us getting that through a grant, every year, we get 1/20 of that amount, including the interest that's accruing," Kitchenman said.

Five new classrooms for Oakview still needed

The grant funds are not eligible to cover athletic improvements, nor new construction, Kitchenman said—so the plan to add five classrooms to the Oakview Elementary school extension, which could cost an estimated \$2.1 million, would have to be separately financed.

"Right now we have nine kindergarten classes with nine part-time teachers," Kitchenman said of that proposal. "Those teachers are sharing rooms.

"We're actually four rooms short, and our thought was we would add additional preschool space for disabled children," he said.

Once the board finalizes its financing options, Kitchenman said, residents can expect a lot of public presentations.

If it doesn't have the appetite for a referendum or for debt service, the district can try to get the work done through its regular budgetary process, but that's not optimal, he said.

"In my time here, the highest amount [the board has invested in capital projects in a single year] has been \$500,000," Kitchenman said. "That would take eight years.

"That also doesn't work with the grant requirements," he said. "You have 18 months to show [them] where the money's coming from."

'Impossible' to pull dollars out of operating budget

Some of the improvements "probably should have been done some time ago," Kitchenman said, "and because of the budget being what it is, it's tough to fit it in during the context of regular operations.

"To do a significant amount of work, if we were just doing grant projects, we'd still have to come up with \$4 million," he said. "Pulling \$4 million out of an operating budget is just impossible."

The upcoming school budget is still going to have a significant focus on curriculum, Kitchenman said. A big portion of it will pay for the educational materials purchased in prior years, since the district is on a three-year payment plan for its literacy series.

As a 1:1 technology district, Kitchenman said, West Deptford has delayed the finalization of its student laptop initiative, and still expects to lease another 500 laptops.

Finally, for any who might have wondered whether the infrastructure improvements would include one last kick at the can for the privately funded, proposed football field house construction project, Kitchenman said it's a no-go.

"I believe the proponents of that idea have pulled it off the table, and the initial source of funding they have has pulled that money as well," he said.