

Search for school location is under way: Superintendent says town needs to be ready to apply for state reimbursement

*By COURTNEY HOLLANDS
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Abington school officials hope the planned middle school will be a "community school"- one with facilities and resources that the whole town can use.

The middle school site selection committee is looking at potential locations of 20 to 25 acres. The parcels must be surveyed and studied before Abington can apply to the state for construction reimbursement.

The reimbursement waiting list stretches into 2007, but School Superintendent John Aherne said the Abington school district wants to be ready.

"The middle school will be the only new construction in our plan," he said. "It's the cornerstone of what we are trying to do to improve school facilities."

Also planned are repairs and additions to the Woodsdale School, the Early Childhood Center and the high school. Frolio Junior High School will become an elementary school and the Center and North elementary schools, built in the 1930s, will be closed and turned over to the town.

Incoming Assistant Superintendent Peter Schafer, a member of the middle school site selection committee, said the committee has identified a few sites that might be appropriate for the new middle school.

Finding a parcel that is big enough, town-owned and wetlands-free has been a challenge, he said.

"The developers have already discovered Abington," Schafer said. "...We have to look at the leftover land."

The former Griffin Dairy, a large piece of town-owned land on Plymouth Street, looks promising, he said.

Two acres of the former farm are being looked at as a possible site for a senior center, but Schafer said the school plans "will in no way impact the proposed senior center....We want to work with the seniors to develop a community school."

The new middle school would be for grades 5 through 8. Grades 5 and 6 would be housed in one wing and grades 7 and 8 in another. Common facilities, including a library, gym, auditorium and cafeteria, would connect the two wings.

If a senior center is built near the middle school, seniors could use the school in the afternoons, perhaps as a place for exercise programs and meetings, Aherne said

"Intergenerational projects could be arranged," he said. "The seniors might want to volunteer in the schools, for example. ...We are looking at different possibilities to benefit the oldest and youngest of our citizens."

The middle school site selection committee is running into the same problem that has mired Abington school-repair efforts for years: a lack of money.

A school department request for \$98,500 was rejected at town meeting this spring. The money would have been spent on site walks and wetlands flagging at the possible middle school sites.

And although Lennar Property Corp., master developer for reuse of the closed South Weymouth Naval Air Station, has promised Abington schools \$200,000 as part of its mitigation package for the town, that money may not be available for a few years, Aherne said.

The schools - with their leaky roofs, drafty windows and cramped conditions - cannot wait that long, he said.

"We want to be the first in line with the best plans possible when the school funding opens up in 2007," Aherne said. "Certainly over the next year we need the support of the citizens of Abington to move these projects forward."

The school department will again ask the town for \$98,500 at this fall's special town meeting.

"This issue is not going to go away," Aherne said. "...Every year it becomes more difficult to maintain our buildings. "We are going to get to the point of tough decisions, where we will be forced to close schools."

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