

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Center School Project

It seems like a long time ago that Longmeadow voters approved a project to renovate Center School, but the summer interval was needed to arrive at the latest step in the enterprise.

That step involves gaining a position on the state's list of proposals to be funded by the School Building Assistance Bureau (SBAB). Longmeadow is listed as number 23, a priority determined by comparative rankings with other communities' needs, a ranking that means funding for it will likely be available in the next fiscal year.

It may be because of my own ties with Center that I am particularly happy to see progress in updating the school. In 1982 I was both a new School Committee member and the parent of a new Center student. That was also the year I first dealt with the needs of the building. When veteran committee member Bob Stewart first joined the board two years later, he had two daughters. I knew improvements would not benefit my son, but I did not dream that they would be too late for Bob's third child, his son, Timmy.

At any rate, renovations are coming, and here is a brief report on this town/state partnership.

Massachusetts assists local school districts in providing school facilities, providing assistance ranging as high as 90 percent for needy cities and towns. Districts must develop their building plans, gain local approval from the town meeting or City Council, and then submit those plans to the state. The Center project spent a number of years in the developmental phase. The town struggled to arrive at a consensus regarding the future of the school, considering its site in the Historic District as well as the difficulties in dealing with its two-building educational arrangement. At the same time the town was delaying a decision, the state faced a serious fiscal crisis and reduced the available funds for school buildings. Beyond the shortage of funds, a further difficulty was faced by suburban towns like ours. Projects were ranked according to need and towns like Longmeadow had a low ranking. When the new year's ranking were redeveloped, prior years' projects were pitted against a whole new list of competing projects.

The system did not work!

Poor communities needed schools, but in recessionary years when the whole state was working under the limits of Proposition 2 ½ everyone needed state help. The Legislature passed a law in 1992 to assure that once a project is ranked, that ranking is permanent. Number 23 may not be funded this year, but it will be high on next year's list. In addition to guaranteeing a position, the Legislature has worked to increase the budget for the SBAB, allowing more communities to upgrade their schools.

Longmeadow has presented a good plan to the state, and a new Center School is now assured. When construction begins, it will unfortunately displace the hundreds of children now educated in the structures. But when construction is completed, it will offer new opportunities to those youngsters.