

HOLYOKE

Council approves \$475K for school feasibility study

By Dennis Hohenberger - Special to The Republican

The city council approved a \$475,000 bonding request for a middle school feasibility study.

In a 9-4 vote Tuesday, the order garnered the two-thirds majority needed for passage.

The Massachusetts School Building Authority requires a feasibility study on school renovation and building projects. The authority reimburses school districts for construction costs up 80%, though Holyoke's rate would likely be lower.

Holyoke will explore building a single middle school at what is now the Peck School. The project would entail razing the 1970s structure and replacing it with a modern facility.

In 2019, voters overwhelmingly rejected a tax override ballot question to bond for two new middle schools.

Proponents argue the new school would lower overall costs districtwide, especially in energy savings, consolidating services and closing several elementary schools. If built, the new school would hold 550 students, or half of the city's middle schoolers.

Councilor Joseph M. McGiverin filed a separate order before Tuesday's meeting. The order corrected an assumption the school building authority would not partially reimburse the city for the feasibility study.

In conversations with state school receiver Anthony Soto and the school building committee, McGiverin said the authority would look at reimbursing Holyoke for

the study if the construction proposal moves into the later rounds.

The city has not built a new school since the 1980s, when Wm. J. Dean Vocational School opened, McGiverin said. Nevertheless, he praised the city for keeping Holyoke's public schools in "fantastic shape."

The school building committee is considering a design template or an available blueprint for the project offered by the authority. McGiverin reminded the council the city holds the option not to spend the total \$475,000.

"Our schools are in rough shape, and

it's not about building one school. This is a plan that's been well thought out and put on the table for five years," McGiverin said. "It would make a big difference not just to the students, but a big difference to the teachers and parents."

Councilor at Large Kevin Jourdain opposed the bond, saying the city of Holyoke lacked long-term capital and financial plans. He worried the city could not meet future debt obligations on unrelated repairs, purchases or projects.

Jourdain felt the council was "rushing" the vote and allowed emotions to inform the decision-making. He likened the process to buying a used car, with a slick salesperson buttering up the customer.

Jourdain added that the council did more work on a \$9,600 expenditure than on the \$475,000 bond proposal. With the city's public schools still under receivership, he suggested the state pay for the new school.

Councilors Jourdain, Linda Vacon, Will Puello and David Bartley voted "no" on the bond order.

Monument restoration

In other business, the council accepted a \$10,000 donation from PeoplesBank and \$1,000 from Easthampton Savings Bank toward restoring the 140-year-old Lady Liberty statue in Veterans Park. The figure bears the names of 57 Holyoke men who perished in the Civil War.

Michael Falcetti and Donald Provost led the fundraising effort. In November, state

Sen. John Velis, D-Westfield, announced a \$50,000 state grant for the project. In addition, the Community Preservation Act Committee set aside \$20,000.

Jourdain requested a “friendly amendment,” noting the statue was initially named Goddess of Victory when dedicated July 4, 1876.

“It’s an iconic statue and so much about the history of this community,” he said. “We’re well served by preserving its memory.”

Ward 6 Councilor Juan Anderson-Burgos said the names of the fallen are no longer legible on the monument. “It’s the least we can do is keep their names forever,” he said.