

Voters warm to district building projects

New York State School Boards Association

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The lean years for school construction in New York appear to be over.

After a decade-long slump, architects and construction firms throughout the state have been hiring to tackle an influx of work. And school officials say the timing feels right - from both financial and educational perspectives - to resume investing in their districts' physical infrastructure.

"I think, over a period of a few years, school districts took a step back," said Keith Langlotz, president of the New York State School Facilities Association and director of facilities for the Williamsville district. "Maybe they weren't sure of voter support or money was tight or there were other economic forces at work. If there was any reason to pause, they paused."

But in recent months, many school districts have been seeking voter approval for multi-million dollar capital projects. Since November, at least 18 school districts have held referendums or plan to do so early this year.

Almost all of the recent capital project proposals passed easily and with little controversy. One exception was the North Colonie school district, where a \$194.6 million school renovation plan was voted down. The district was criticized for using just one polling place (as recommended by counsel) and holding the vote 10 days before Christmas (to try to capture incentive aid expiring in 2016). The district originally planned to hold the vote in October but logistically was unable to do so, Superintendent D. Joseph Corr told the Albany *Times Union* newspaper.

Built-up demand after the so-called "great recession" has contributed to the current wave of capital projects according to architects who specialize in school construction and renovation.

"A lot of districts did not pursue projects during the recession, and that left a lot of unmet needs," said Michael Fanning, a partner with Mosaic Associates, a Troy architectural firm.

Architects, builders, financial experts and school officials who spoke with *On Board* pointed to six other factors that have led to new capital projects:

1. Building condition survey findings of "unsatisfactory." New York mandates that school districts conduct building condition surveys every five years. State aid made available for 2015 surveys was extended into 2016, and most or all districts now have revised their five-year capital plans.

"Anything rated unsatisfactory needs to be taken care of in the next five years, before the next survey," said Randy Collins, president of CSArch, an Albany-based architectural firm.

Projects that rose to high-priority status included unglamorous-but-essential projects to fix or replace roofs, boilers, masonry, plumbing, electrical wiring and controls, pavement and windows.

"It's really pretty straightforward stuff," said Fanning of Mosaic Associates.

2. Debt retirement. School construction bonds typically have terms of 15 or 30 years. That means debt from an earlier surge in capital projects around the year 2000 has been retired, offering opportunities for districts to issue new bonds while limiting actual increases in annual debt service costs, school officials say.

"When debt payments expire on an old project, that's the perfect time to start a new project," said Deborah Cunningham, director of education and research for the New York State Association of School Business Officials. "School districts are starting to look at capital expenditures, going forward, in a new way."

Districts usually rely on taxpayers to fund debt service payments, and avoiding big fluctuations in a districts' debt service obligations avoids big swings in resident's tax bills.

Finance officials and construction managers also favor referendum votes in the autumn and winter to get bidding underway well in advance of summer construction seasons, to help ensure the availability of qualified contractors and to limit the potential for costs to rise with heavy demand.

3. Pedagogy. Many projects approved by voters in recent months feature elements related to pedagogy that relies on the Internet and incorporates more project-based learning.

4. The march of time. "In some cases, the buildings, themselves, and their systems are reaching an expiration point in their useful life. Most buildings were designed for a 50-year life expectancy," said Carl Stewart, an Albany-based general manager and vice president

with Turner Construction.

Many schools in New York were built in the 1930s (sturdy buildings that often are still in use); the 1950s and 60s (typically non-descript structures built to accommodate Baby Boomers). These buildings often have undergone major renovations at least once, sometimes twice, architects said.

5. Desire for security upgrades. It's unusual to find any recent bond proposal that doesn't include at least one item related to hardened doors, security cameras or more extensive renovations inspired by student safety concerns. In New York, the trend has been supported by a provision of the Smart Schools Bond Act that makes portions of that state money available for security improvements.

Interest in school security rose sharply after the Newtown shootings in December 2012. Security portions of capital project plans routinely become "headline news" when they are presented, noted Jim Hickey, a project manager with Young + Wright Architectural in Buffalo.

Architects say designers are working to reduce the number of entrance points into any school through "door access controls" and other measures. School offices are being placed closer to central entrances.

6. Interest in energy efficiency. Energy upgrades are hot right now, said John Jojo, another partner with Mosaic, who works with several rural school districts.

Jojo said energy projects can be adopted as separate projects that run "parallel" with other capital projects. The long-term cost-savings from reduced energy usage can help offset total project costs. And, if approved in a referendum, energy projects can be eligible for additional aid incentives to encourage efficiency or use of renewable sources, he said.

Solar panels, LED lighting, dual-fuel boilers, new roofs and windows all are among popular energy projects that architects say can yield efficiency benefits.

While modern windows commonly are more energy-efficient than the ones they replace, they also can be a good call for architectural aesthetics and improving the learning environment, said Collins of CSArch.

"In the 1970s, a lot of schools were built without a lot of windows . or they were renovated with squatty little windows and low ceilings," Collins noted. "The idea was to be more energy efficient. Now, there is evidence that natural light is more conducive to learning. So, as these windows get to where they need to be replaced, we are restoring windows to their original size. It matches the architecture, and today's windows are more energy-efficient while still allowing the natural light in."

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