

Merged voke school finds local support; now it needs dollars

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DANVERS - Proponents of a merged mega-vocational school hope the state can pick up most of the \$140 million cost for a new school to be built on the Essex Aggie campus.

"Nothing has been agreed to or finalized other than a strong commitment from all the folks we've spoken to," said Town Manager Wayne Marquis, who is chairman of the merger's Temporary Oversight Board. "At the same time, every other region in the state with a vocational school has already had an investment to modernize or renovate.

"This is such a unique project, with the agricultural school being combined with a vocational school, and we think that it's deserving."

Marquis was among the officials at a North Shore Chamber of Commerce board of directors breakfast meeting yesterday morning, held in support of the proposed merger and its benefits to economic development on the North Shore. The project would merge Essex Agricultural and Technical High School, North Shore Technical High School in Middleton, and the Peabody High School vocational program.

Proponents hope that a combination of state funding will cover at least 70 percent of the cost - placing 30 percent or less on the cities and towns in the district.

"We believe that in cooperation with the (Massachusetts School Building Authority) and a freestanding bill that would go just toward this project - either through a bond bill or revenues - the communities could pick up between 25 and 30 percent," said state Rep. Brad Hill, R-Ipswich, who attended yesterday's meeting. "We're going to have to work out all those things in the next few months. There is certainly a lot more discussion to be had."

The group overseeing the merger has been in talks with legislators, local leaders, the business community and the governor's office, according to North Shore Technical High School Superintendent Amy O'Malley, who is a member of the Temporary Oversight Board. O'Malley believes funding is the biggest hurdle. Support for the school is abundant, as evidenced by yesterday's meeting.

Mary Sarris, executive director of the North Shore Workforce Investment Board, shared findings from a North Shore labor market study her organization just published. She said the most in-demand and well-paying local jobs are in construction, financial services, health care and manufacturing - as well as the emerging industry of biotechnology.

"Given that, we believe it's just critical that the high school get built," Sarris said. "There is a void for occupational training on the North shore, and we need a vibrant, active, well-connected school."

Currently, Essex Aggie and North Shore Tech are filled beyond capacity and turn away hundreds of applicants each year.

The \$140 million facility - which architects scaled back from the original \$180 million proposal - would educate 1,400 students in a four-story building off Route 62, across the street from the current main campus of Essex Aggie.

The project time line calls for the Legislature to work out the funding this winter, because the project will require approval from cities and towns by spring 2008 to move ahead with the design and project manager selection. According to the time line, construction would begin in 2010 and be completed by summer 2012.