

News

**\$122 million would revamp town schools**

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A consultant's plan calls for that much to be spent over 15 years to reinvent the school system and bring it into the 21st century to compete in a global economy.

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MIDDLETOWN - An ambitious and costly plan for reconfiguring the town's public schools promises to dramatically transform Middletown's classrooms for the next generation of learners.

A consulting firm hired by the School Department has pegged a proposal to create lower- and upper-grade campuses in the buildings now housing the middle and high schools at \$122 million over 15 years.

The consultants said the plan, while certainly expensive, would be more beneficial to modern learning and more cost-effective than remodeling the district's aging school buildings (to the tune of \$108 million) or constructing all new buildings. The plan also utilizes two buildings with "good bones"- the middle and high school, while potentially selling surplus buildings to help finance the work.

**Fielding Nair** International, a Florida-based educational planning and design firm, recommends that the school district: renovate Gaudet Middle School, on Aquidneck Avenue, and reconfigure the building as a high school; build a new high school on the former Starlight Drive-in property adjacent to the middle school; and close the three elementary schools and move them to remodeled space in what's now Middletown High School on Valley Road.

The elementary campus and the middle and high school campus could be linked by recreational space, the consultants said.

Middletown schools must reinvent themselves to compete with the global economy, said consultant Prakash Nair, president of **Fielding Nair**, and that starts with its facilities. This means designing buildings with open classrooms, performance areas, and shared spaces such as gymnasiums and libraries. The reconfigured buildings would allow for energy savings as well as innovative instruction methods, such as team-teaching and group learning, which are hampered by cramped spaces in school buildings that are more than 40 years old.

"The commodity we're going to sell in the 21st century is our creativity and you're not going to do that with an educational system designed in the last century," Nair said last night at a joint Town Council-School Committee meeting on the issue.

"Naturally, the focus is on the cost," said Schools Supt. Rosemarie K. Kraeger. "We need to also be focused on the teaching and learning piece. It is a journey we are taking."

**Fielding Nair** envisions a phased implementation of the plan, with the first three years including designing "learning communities" at Gaudet Middle School and at Forest Avenue School, developing a master plan for the old drive-in site, selling the unused Linden School property and creating an "enrichment center" with a \$10- million performing arts center and health and fitness center at Gaudet. The school district has already renovated the Gaudet library into an "Internet cafe" as a pilot initiative.

Construction of a new high school and the temporary moving of the middle school students into the new high school is proposed for years 4 through 7 of the proposal, followed in years 8 to 15 by moving middle schoolers to their newly renovated building, renovating the current high school into a "lower-school" campus and selling off the rest of the School Department's surplus property.

Jay Litman, of **Fielding Nair**, called the proposal a "generational master plan," and said Middletown is typical of other similarly sized communities just now realizing that their schools are outmoded.

"Nobody is doing this," Litman said. "This will be the wave of the future. America has to catch up with the rest of the world."

Town Council President Paul M. Rodrigues had a touch of sticker- shock.

"The cost is staggering, it doesn't matter which way you look at it," Rodrigues said. "It looks like it's a good plan Funding sources are probably my biggest concern.... Education is the most important thing we do, but we need to be realistic about how we're going to get there."

"In the end," Litman said, "this plan will give you more bang for your buck. We know you can't raise \$122 million. We know the state can't give you \$122 million. You're not the only community that has to rebuild yourself, but you're the first one doing it. The reconstruction of American schools is going to be the dominant issue of the middle of the century."

The \$122-million estimate could be reduced by the potential 30- percent state reimbursement on construction costs, by the proceeds of the sale of surplus school properties and by corporate sponsorships, the consultants said.

School Committee member Theresa M. Silveira Spengler said the council and school board need to unite behind this proposal for the public to buy into it.

Councilman Edward J. Silveira Jr. agreed.

"Our buildings and our infrastructure will continue to pull us down and will continue to place financial burdens on us unless we take a step forward," he said. "It's important we don't just focus on the [\$122 million] number. It's important we move forward, certainly slowly, and educate residents to make sure we don't continue to let these properties burden our system."

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