

Dist. 99 looks to '06 capital projects

By Sarah Stone

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Community High School District 99 has started looking ahead to its 2006-07 capital projects, with a prioritized list due to the board by next month's board meeting.

District 99 Controller Mark Staehlin presented the board with a five-year projection of capital projects Nov. 21. The list includes everything from improvements needed immediately to items that may need replacement within the next few years.

Although the list included more than 100 projects and totaled about \$24 million, Staehlin stressed that the list was not meant to be all-inclusive.

"This list is not every single capital project," he said. "This should not be misconstrued as everything District 99 wants to do."

In addition to providing a list of the district's expected projects for the next five years, Staehlin also explained to the board and the public the method used to identify and prioritize capital projects. He said the process begins in September with the district's projected budget and an update of the estimated costs on the five-year list.

In October, administrators within the district's buildings update, review and prioritize their capital projects needs. In November, the district takes each building's list and ranks each project into a master list. Finally, administrators present final recommended items to the School Board in December.

Bid requests typically go out during the winter and spring, and construction begins in late spring and over the summer.

Some residents at the board meeting Nov. 21 said they were concerned that the community doesn't have an opportunity to give much input during the prioritization process.

"We need to be involved in the hierarchy," Woodridge resident Phil Labak said. "The community has no input into the prioritization of projects. A citizen's group has offered to play a role, and we have not been responded to."

Labak compiled a list of 21 residents who have offered to be on a capital projects assessment committee.

According to Staehlin, the district has no plans to form such a committee. If an ad hoc capital projects committee were to be formed, it would most likely coincide with a large influx of funding, such as through a referendum or profits from the sale of the 45-acre parcel the district owns in Woodridge.

"If the property ever gets sold, then there would be a body of dollars that

could be used for some of these larger projects," Staehlin said. "When you have these huge events and unusual situation, at that point I think the board would probably consider having a study committee on how should we use the funds."

Staehlin declined to comment further on how negotiations are going between the district and the village of Woodridge. However, he said, "to begin thinking about how to spend proceeds from land is premature."

For the current budget, Staehlin said the community has opportunities to contribute to the district's identification of capital projects. Community members are encouraged to suggest projects at board meetings or send them to board members and administrators, he said.

Prioritization, however, will be left up to the district, Staehlin said.

"(The community) can have a say in what high priority projects are to them," Staehlin said. "The processes are set up so the administrators, principals and teachers, who are closest to the education program, have the final say. What may be an apparently high priority project within the community may not have the same weight within the scope of the entire district."

However, Labak argued that administrators may not make the best decisions. He pointed to a carpeting project approved at the Nov. 21 board meeting for the administrative service center. The district capital improvements budget for the 2005-06 year is \$575,000, and the carpet work cost \$40,000.

"That's nearly 10 percent of the (capital projects) budget," Labak said. "I have a hard time believing the carpets (are) a top priority. The administration made the tough decision about what we're going to spend our money on. Without the public's involvement, carpet was chosen."

Staehlin agree that, to the community, re-carpeting may not seem like a top priority.

"People want to ask, 'Why is the central office getting new carpeting?' It's a project that had been put off for several years," Staehlin said.

Staehlin plans to present a list of projects for the 2006-07 year to the board at its next meeting, set for 7 p.m. Monday, Dec. 12, at Downers Grove North High School, 4426 Main St. The list will include high-priority projects that can be completed within the district's tentative \$660,000 capital projects budget.