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Capital Project Vote Moved to October

To provide more opportunities for community engagement and more time for educators to create a detailed plan for student programs, the Board of Education has decided to postpone a Capital Project vote until October.

“We originally considered a March vote because we have a few critical infrastructure projects we need to address as soon as possible,” said Superintendent Bob Horan. “But we found another solution to address those issues first, which allows us to plan a more thorough Capital Project to present to our community.”

Instead of putting the entire Capital Project up for a vote in March, the district will instead have a proposition on the May budget vote asking for the public’s support to address three infrastructure issues.

The first issue is replacing a galvanized water pipe in the High School basement that dates back to the school’s construction in 1955. The second issue is getting the High School off well water by hooking into the village water system. The third issue is resurfacing the Middle School roof, which will extend its warranty.

“The water pipes have been replaced numerous times and desperately need to be replaced,” said Building and Grounds Superintendent Matt LaClair. “The

Health Department has mandated we get the High School off well water as soon as it’s possible. And if we let the Middle School roof go too long, it will require replacing instead of resurfacing.”

The district will provide more detailed information about the May proposition in future communications, including a district newsletter.

The district started considering a Capital Project in October 2012 when it created a Facilities Committee of community members, students, educators and Board members to assess the district’s facility needs.

Over the past five months, the district held two educational summits where it gathered community input. Educational Consultant Robert Hendricks also met in small group settings with faculty and staff from each school building. The results are available in a Program Capacity Study located on the district website, www.schodack.k12.ny.us.

Additional community forums and communications will be provided leading up to the Capital Project vote in October.

After reviewing the Program Capacity Study, Board members decided at their Jan. 16 meeting to relocate grades 6-8 from the Middle School to the Elementary

and High School buildings if the Capital Project is approved. The change is not scheduled to occur until the 2016-17 school year, once the project is finished.

“This has been a very difficult decision,” said Board President Andrew Fleck. “While my heart says to keep students at the Middle School, my head says it would be better to move them to the other two buildings where we could take the savings it would create and put the money into programs for all our students. It would also provide opportunities for our faculty to collaborate more.”

Mr. Horan noted that one of the biggest advantages to delaying the Capital Project vote until October is educators will have time to create a detailed plan of how grades would be reconfigured so parents and community members would have a clear understanding before they are asked to vote.

“And we are committed to not closing the Middle School but repurposing it so it does not become an eyesore to the community,” Mr. Horan. “We already have Questar III BOCES leasing classroom space and start-up businesses in the basement. We have active discussions to lease more classrooms out to Questar, businesses and community groups.”



Maple Hill High School Pioneers Digital Learning

Maple Hill High School is using computer tablets this year to teach science, social studies, math and English to two groups of students as part of a new program that is engaging both students and teachers.

Each morning, two “learning communities” of freshmen and sophomores start their day learning core subjects from a group of five teachers who work together to plan how to deliver curriculum digitally.

Instead of using tablets simply as e-readers, students use them to research topics, stay organized, work collaboratively,

write papers, converse with classmates and teachers, explain how they solved problems, create presentations and many other ways.

“I don’t know of another school that is using tablets in such creative ways,” said Principal Ron Agostinoni. “It is a credit to our teachers who have embraced the technology because they see how they can engage students in ways that help them learn.”

Maple Hill High School’s use of tablets was started through a collaboration between the district and ClassBook.com, a Schodack-based company that works with K-12 schools

nationwide to provide curriculum management for digital and physical teaching resources. ClassBook.com donated money that helped train faculty, purchase devices and acquire digital content for the initiative.

Principal Agostinoni expects the use of tablets to grow, with his core group of teachers helping others to learn how to teach digitally.

“Tablets really are engagement tools,” said Mr. Agostinoni. “They’re much cheaper than desktop computers and applications are much cheaper than PC software.”

Encouraging Discussion of Literature

In a recent discussion of “A Raisin in the Sun”, a small group of students sat in the middle of the classroom analyzing the motivations of characters in the novel. “I want you to not just say ‘I agree’,” instructed teacher Heather Flood. “You need to state ‘why’ and move the conversation forward.”

Outside the “fishbowl” discussion group, other students sat in pairs, typing comments on their tablets into a chat forum. Walking around the room to work with students, Ms. Flood used her tablet to synch to a projector, bringing up the chat forum and points made by students for the entire group to discuss.

“Some students aren’t as comfortable raising their hands to offer their opinions,” explained Ms. Flood. “This provides an opportunity to include them in the discussion so it prompts more conversation.”

Ms. Flood also noted how she can e-mail students to remind them about homework or insert questions on reading assignments or comments on homework.



Engaging Students in Science



As part of an earth science research project, students used Atablets to learn about astronomers. Moving around the classroom, teacher Nate Porter instructed students to use the digital folder he created to find videos and materials he recommended they use.

“When I’m writing on a white board, my back is to them,” Mr. Porter explained. “With a tablet, I can face them and walk around the room to make sure they’re working and understanding what I’m teaching.”

Using his tablet, Mr. Porter quickly brought up student assignments on density. Clicking on one, a video started of a student writing an equation while her voice explained her reasoning.

“It’s nice to see how students figured something out and how they learned. It’s a cool way to create that knowledge instead of just us teaching them and them parroting back what we say,” Mr. Porter said. “I like students to have that cognitive struggle.”

Start-Up Company Provides Student Opportunities

With their start-up business in the Middle School basement growing, MICROrganic Technologies found it no longer had the time to produce and sell the microbial fuel cell educational kits their business started with.

But instead of abandoning the kits, company owner Brent Solina turned the business over to High School seniors Adrian Barber and Sarah Plitnick as part of a pilot internship program. All profits will stay with the district, possibly to fund a student club.

“Our kit business was falling behind as we focused on industrial uses for microbial fuel cell technology,” explained Claire McGrath, chief administrator for MICROrganic Technologies. “So we worked with Mr. Horan and teachers to create a way for students to lead the business. Working with students is really important to us and this provides them with a real world learning experience.”

Adrian and Sarah agreed that the experience of running a business and marketing a product attracted them to the opportunity.

“It’s kind of what I want to do,” explained Adrian. “I want to go to college for engineering and biology so it’s a great opportunity.”

“I thought it would be interesting to be able to work with them and I want to go to college for engineering,” added Sarah.

Working after school in the Middle School basement, Adrian and Sarah are responsible for almost all areas of the business such as using QuickBooks accounting software to track orders, packaging kits for delivery, writing product guidelines to better market the kits and redesigning the product website.



The two seniors are marketing the kits to educators as well as individuals interested in the science behind the technology. They hope to see the business grow and succeed even after they graduate.

“We’ll teach juniors how to run the business so they can keep it running next year,” said Sarah. To learn more, visit www.microrganictech.com/education.

Students Create QR Codes for Books

When students visit Maple Hill Middle School’s library, they can now find summaries of books by scanning a QR code with a tablet or cell phone to watch video book trailers created by classmates.

Library Media Specialist Kim Nemeth explained 6th graders in Reading Teacher Kathy Malloy’s class learned research skills and practiced their writing skills in this hands-on project while at the same time encouraging classmates to read.



Scan QR Code to
Watch Book Trailer



“Students did an amazing job,” said Ms. Nemeth. “They were really driven because they’re producing videos for a real audience. To them the grade is secondary. They know classmates will see them. It’s very engaging for them.”

The assignment started with students first reading a book of their choice and then summarizing their book using short sentences and photos. Mrs. Nemeth then showed the students how to locate and cite pictures that were not copyrighted to create their video book trailers.

Students used the online website Animoto to create their videos. Students used another website to create QR codes that linked directly to their videos, which Mrs. Nemeth had uploaded to YouTube. Finally, students taped the QR codes to the insides of the books and created table displays to encourage classmates to watch their videos and read the books.

“We gave them directions to follow and they figured it out,” said Ms. Nemeth. “So much of 21st century learning is teaching students how to use skills and read carefully so they can figure it out on their own.”

The project was fully aligned to the Common Core Learning Standards and the Empire State Information Literacy Standards, noted Ms. Nemeth, including producing writing appropriate to the task and audience and using technology to publish writing.

Postal Customer

Produced by Questar III Communications Service

Help Advocate for Schools

Schodack CSD joined communities from all 47 Capital District school districts on Jan. 30 to show their support for public education at the "NY Schools STILL in Fiscal Peril" event at Colonie Central High School.

State Senator Kathy Marchione and Assemblyman Steve McLaughlin, along with nearly every state legislator in the Capital Region, attended the event to learn about the fiscal crisis facing public schools and talk with constituents afterward.

Superintendent Bob Horan helped organize the event as Chairman of Questar III's Legislative Committee. Of particular concern is the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA), a cut to every district's share of state aid that was intended as a one-year fix to end the state's deficit but has continued in each of the past five years.

To help continue the momentum to end the GEA, visit www.schodack.k12.ny.us for information on how you can advocate for public schools.

CES Students Skype with Authors

Fifth graders at Castleton Elementary School asked 10 authors and illustrators from around the country about their work this year without ever leaving their library.

They did so by using Skype, an online video conferencing website, as part of a collaborative project between teachers and Library Media Specialist Stacey Rattner.

"This really gets them excited about reading and books. All the authors they spoke with are contenders for the Newbery Medal for best children's book," said Ms. Rattner. "Some students also wrote authors and received letters back."

On Jan. 24, for example, the entire fifth grade class gathered around a screen in the library, peppering author Sy

Montgomery with questions about her non-fiction book, "The Tapir Scientist". Students interacted with Ms. Montgomery as if she was in the room, raising their hands to ask questions.

"How do you find out about different research projects?" asked one student.

"Why did you decide to do research on tapirs instead of other animals?" asked another student.

"All these questions are great questions," responded Ms. Montgomery.

At the end of the conversation, students thanked the author and waived their hands and cheered, to the delight of Ms. Montgomery. "It was great to meet you all," she told students.

