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Four DeKalb schools to get \$7 mil revamp Chesebro, Clinton Rosette, Huntley and Malta H.S. make the list

By John Kelleher - Managing Editor

DeKALB - The DeKalb School Board has approved a \$7 million proposal for making renovations to four schools.

Because the district is using existing funds, voter approval will not be required, Schools Superintendent Brian Ali explained. Three times in recent years, voters have turned down referendums to finance up to \$50 million in school construction.

The work will be done at Chesebro Elementary School, Clinton Rosette and Huntley middle schools, and the old Malta High School, which will be converted to an elementary school. The work is expected to be completed by the fall of 2004.

The board Monday night unanimously approved the concept of a "partnership" school at the old Malta High School building. The plan was worked out between the district and Northern Illinois University.

It calls for innovative programs, such as:

- Before- and after-school programs
- More opportunity to study technology and fine arts
- English as a Second Language programs
- All-day kindergarten.

Professional educators and student teachers from Northern Illinois University would augment the program offered by district employees.

"This will evolve into something we have never had in our community," Ali said in urging the board to accept the plan. "It will benefit DeKalb students first and then it will benefit NIU."

The district will rely heavily on bond revenue to pay for the renovations at Huntley, Rosette and Chesebro. The city has agreed to pay off the bonds using tax increment financing funds.

The city created TIF districts to spur economic development in depressed areas of the city. Under TIF, municipalities continue to receive property taxes from existing homes and businesses. But as growth occurs, the additional property tax money generated is put into a kitty.

The city has historically given some of that money to the district. Under an agreement expected to win city council approval later this month, the city will be committed to turning over from \$575,000 to \$941,000 to the district annually over the next seven years.

"The district is a good credit risk," said the district's financial adviser, Linda Rafanello. "We will go to financial institutions and say, 'We know we are going to get this money; give it to us now.'"

The district will "skinny down" the budget to find the \$1.3 million needed for the old Malta High School renovations. The school is not in a TIF district and is not eligible for those funds.

The district also will use \$200,000 in impact fees and \$950,000 in state aid it received because of its merger with the old Malta School District, officials said.

In other business Monday:

Board members said they would advertise for applicants for the school board seat vacated by Susan Barshinger.

Board President Tom Teresinski said the board could appoint someone without conducting a formal search, but added, "We want this process to be as open as possible."

The board also heard from Casey Mascall, president of the union representing support staff.

Mascall strongly opposed the proposal to privatize the cafeteria and janitorial staff.

If the district hired a private company to run the kitchen, "You will get a lot of tasteless food and price increases," he predicted.

He said custodians do a lot of carpentry and plumbing work that a private company won't do. The district will end up seeking bids for that work and any savings will be lost, he predicted.

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