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Denville vote on building new school pushed back

Board now targeting December, aiming to buy land near H.S.

By Rob Jennings

DENVILLE -- A referendum to build a new middle school will take place no earlier than December, school officials announced Wednesday.

Officials said the K-8 district would be unable to hold a referendum in September -- the school board's original plan -- because the acquisition of property to build the middle school has not been finalized.

Board Vice President Al Gellene attributed the delay to ongoing negotiations with the property owner, who was not identified.

"I'm disappointed at the delay, but I have said from the beginning that we were not going to rush this project. We will continue to make sure everything is done properly so that the community can have confidence in the process," said Gellene, who chairs the board's buildings and grounds committee.

44-acre lot

The board announced in January that it wants to build a new middle school on approximately 44 privately owned acres near Morris Knolls High School. It could cost up to \$69 million for construction and land acquisition, the district's architect said at that time.

Some parents had objected to building on a district-owned, 18-acre tract on Nicole Drive. The proposed school location on Franklin Avenue, not far from Route 46, is closer to the center of town, school officials have said.

Under the board's plan, Valleyview Middle School would be converted to an elementary school, joining existing elementary schools at Lakeview and Riverview.

"Nothing has changed from our perspective," board President Michael Bertram said Wednesday, when asked if the board remains committed to the project. "We still have those children in trailers (and) substandard spaces," Bertram said.

Plan B cheaper

An alternative to the referendum -- expanding the three schools -- would cost about \$20 million less, according to the district's architect. School officials said previously they decided to pursue a new building because of logistical problems posed by expanding the existing schools.

"We respect the board of education for making sure the details of the referendum are complete before moving forward," Linda Sullivan-Atkinson, a Denville resident and co-chair of Vote YES for Denville, said in a statement.

"We urge the Board to seize this delay as an opportunity to educate residents further about the need for a new middle school and the extensive steps completed in the process so far," she said.