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# THE SUN

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MOST PRESENT COUPON

## State ups aid for TCSD school consolidation

*71% of Fletcher expansion would be paid by state*

**By David J. Hill**  
TONAWANDA SUN CORRESPONDENT

Tonawanda City School District Superintendent Timothy Oldenburg almost couldn't believe the email he was reading from the state Education Department.

The department was informing the district that it plans to provide

more state aid than anticipated for a proposed capital project that would consolidate the district's three elementary schools into one campus.

"There's no question the additional funding allocated for this community and for our students, families and taxpayers is a wonderful win," Oldenburg said during a presentation updating the School Board on the project Tuesday night. "But it in itself is almost a referendum of the project. State Ed, by allocating more funds, is essentially saying this project makes sense."

The TONA 2020 Task Force community committee crafted the plan. Rather than pouring state aid into aging buildings every few years, the task force last winter recommended that the district proceed with a plan to consolidate Riverview, Mullen and Fletcher schools into one campus on the Fletcher school site. Fletcher would be renovated and expanded to accommodate Tonawanda's pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade pupils.

The project is estimated to cost \$53.6 million, which is less than the

projected cost of continually fixing each of the three existing elementary school buildings. It would also allow the district to deliver more efficient instruction by not having to shuffle teachers and support staff among several buildings, and it would create stability for students, district leaders say.

And, Oldenburg said, it reflects the "new normal" that public school districts must come to terms with.

"It will help our district financially to be sustainable in a tax cap era over a long period of time if we

proactively reconfigure ourselves and understand and accept what the new normal is," he said.

The state aid figures New York's Education Department provided the district last winter were discouraging. It initially calculated that 59 percent of the project would be eligible for state aid and offered \$11 million less than what the district was expecting. District leaders, however, fought for additional funding, explaining the crossroads Tonawanda

See **Aid** on Page A7

## Ken-Ton's BEAT program offers another path for at-risk teens

## Budget woes underscore city's stalled developments

# State agrees continued renovations would be good money after bad

**AID** From Page A1

had reached – dump money into aging buildings or better position itself for the future with the consolidation plan.

State education officials seemed to agree with the direction district administrators wanted to go in and they shared the good news with school officials in late October: 71 percent of the project will be funded through state building aid. That reduces the taxpayer impact to \$1.28 per \$1,000 assessed valuation. It would have been \$1.73 per \$1,000. The average increase over the life of the loan on a home assessed at \$108,000 is just over \$138, Oldenburg said.

Over the next several months, district leaders will

provide more information to the community about the project, which requires a district-wide vote. Tonawanda is targeting an Oct. 22, 2019 public referendum. If the project passes, construction would begin in April 2021 and end in summer 2023, with the new facility opening in September 2023.

“A lot of our work has been measured and not rushed,” Oldenburg said.

That’s because district leaders wanted to come up with a suitable plan for the fourth- and fifth-graders who will be displaced during the two-year construction phase.

District officials looked at St. Francis of Assisi, St. Edmund Elementary School and a building no longer being used by the Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda School

District. But those options would prove costly and, more importantly, would separate pupils and parents from the district.

“We thought about what it would be like in practice to be taking our students from the City of Tonawanda to a different district, that much farther away from home,” Oldenburg said.

As an alternative, the district plans to bring in annex buildings that will house temporary classrooms for fourth-graders on the Riverview and Mullen sites. “This, too, comes with an expense but the pros for this outweighed the cons by a significant amount,” Oldenburg said, adding that the temporary classrooms would be equipped with the proper technology and learning

tools.

Fifth-grade students, meanwhile, would be housed in a wing in the middle school. Some middle school students and classes would be shifted to the high school as a result.

“It’s the most reasonable financial decision and we also believe the most instructionally sound and supportive decision for our students during this two-year time period,” Oldenburg said.

Board members seemed pleased with the new financial calculations for the project, which are much improved since the last update the board received in February.

“It’s exciting to see it start to move forward,” said Board Member Kristen Schmutzler.

# Program is a ‘springboard into BOCES’

**BEAT** From Page A1

She grew up “dirt poor” but was a good student, and her grades reflected that. But she eventually found a boyfriend, and together they

mentors, who will guide up to 18 students at a time through woodworking and electrical projects. It has collected some donated tools and supplies already but could use more. Hausrath and her family have

gram, he rose to Hausrath’s every challenge, even getting a haircut and earning election to the board’s presidency. He’s now in college.

“Some of these kids are

“That’s the time to ask questions and figure it out,” she said. “Let’s see, what did I do wrong here?”

BEAT also will host regular fundraisers, at which

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