

Board gives thumbs up to arts school

Joel Furfari 10/22/2003

PAWTUCKET -- The School Committee took a major step Tuesday night in signaling its support for an arts high school in the Pawtucket Armory.

School backers were elated after the committee agreed to sign a letter of intent to rent about 10,400 square feet of space in the newly-renovated Pawtucket Armory for the arts high school.

Donna Jeffrey, a music teacher at Shea High School and organizer of the arts school, said she was pleased with the School Committee's support.

"This is a huge moment for me," she said.

The committee voted 5-2 in favor of the letter of intent, which is a non-binding agreement that lays out the basis for the future high school. Committee members William Busald and David Chmielewski voted against the measure.

The school, for now being called the Jacqueline M. Walsh School for the Performing and Visual Arts, is expected to open by fall 2005. It would enroll 100 students in the first year, increasing that total in each of the first four years until it reached 400 students in the fourth year.

A major change to the program is that now, about two-fifths of the school's students will be taken from outside of Pawtucket and pay tuition to attend the program.

"The advantage to bringing in outside students is that it would offset some of the costs. By the fourth year, tuition money could pay for the program," Jeffrey said.

School Committee members acknowledged, though, that the arts high school will be a major financial obligation.

Committee Member Amy Breault said she would support going ahead with the school despite significant start-up costs.

"I'm going to really stick my neck out tonight and I'm going to motion to approve (the letter of intent)," she said during the meeting at Jenks Junior High School.

Considerable expenses are likely to come up next year: The school Department will need to spend an estimated \$331,000 on equipment such as art tables, pianos, microphones and computers. Annual rent is estimated at \$126,000 in the first year.

Estimates by the school's organizers put the total price tag at \$897,613 for the first year.

Both Busald and Chmielewski said they supported the school in theory, but that Pawtucket just couldn't afford a major new initiative during tight budget times.

Busald said money is already needed for priorities such as expanding all-day kindergarten, making much-needed fire code repairs in old school buildings and hiring teaching assistants.

"We have too many things happening that we are going to need our money for in the future," he said Tuesday night.

Committee Member Ed Dunn said the arts program would give the city a much-needed "third high school."

"This is absolutely the best bargain this city will ever get," he said.

Under Jeffrey's plan, the school would raise funds by bringing in 40 out-of-district students. Each of them would pay \$8,000 in tuition, raising \$320,000 in the first year.

As enrollment rose to 400 students, 160 students would come from outside Pawtucket and pay \$1.28 million.

In the end, the high school had considerable support from Superintendent Hans Dellith and School Committee Chairman Raymond Spooner.

Both said the arts high school would be a strong asset to the district, particularly as Pawtucket is attempting to attract artists to the city.

In the first year, the school will accept 25 students into each of four sections devoted to art, music, dance and theater. Admission will be based on a competitive audition process and letters of recommendation.

The arts high school is part of a larger effort to revitalize the long-neglected armory building next to Tolman High School on Exchange Street.

Seth Handy, president of the association raising money for the armory's renovation, said the school district's letter of intent will help the group acquire more funding.

"We need a letter of intent to show that we have tenants," he told the School Committee. "We're trying to raise money for the renovations and (banks) are always asking if we have tenants lined up."

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