

Hopes high for Boston's new Dearborn STEM Academy

By James Vaznis | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 31, 2014

For the first time in more than a decade, Boston is about to embark on constructing a school, potentially kicking off a new era for a school system that has long struggled to bring projects to fruition.

Plans for the \$70.7 million Dearborn STEM Academy, which will replace its existing building in Roxbury and serve grades 6 to 12, have stalled so frequently during the past seven years that many supporters began to question whether it would ever be built.

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But Wednesday, after the Massachusetts School Building Authority approved the project, one supporter wept at the meeting. The vote marked the first time the agency approved funding for a new school in Boston since a moratorium on reimbursements ended in 2007.

“It brought tears to my eyes,” said Sheila Gunn, a trustee at the Roxbury Presbyterian Church, which pushed for the project. “This will just add to the revitalization of Roxbury and the Dudley Street area. Good things come to those who wait.”

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The school's focus on science, technology, engineering, and math is expected to be a boon in a neighborhood with high unemployment, equipping students with the skills to succeed in a more technologically advanced economy. It will replace a more than century-old building, designed as an all-girls' high school and plagued recently by aging electrical systems and other problems.

Construction is expected to begin next year, school officials said.

"This will change the lives of generations of students," said Jose Duarte, the Dearborn's principal, calling the vote historic. "Imagine a STEM school in the heart of Roxbury."

In a city where some school buildings date to the late-1800s, the lack of new construction has long frustrated students, parents, and teachers. They wonder why new schools have been going up in places like Newton, Norwood, and Wellesley, but not in Boston.

Boston opened its last new schools in 2003: the Orchard Gardens K-8 in Roxbury, the Frederick Middle School in Dorchester, and the Mildred Avenue K-8 in Mattapan.

Earlier this year, Mayor Martin J. Walsh vowed in his inaugural address to ensure Boston receives its fair share of state construction money "as part of a plan to rebuild its long-neglected and antiquated school buildings."

Many factors have contributed to the School Department's failure to advance projects.

Vacant land is scarce, making it difficult to find locations for new schools, a problem that has stalled efforts to give Boston Arts Academy and the Quincy Upper School new buildings. The most recent proposal calls for a \$261 million facility that would house both schools on Kneeland Street, which would break a state record for the most expensive school.

Some observers say overlapping oversight between the School Department, City Hall, the specific schools involved, and the state building authority has led to differences in ideas and execution, causing projects to languish.

Walsh, as a mayoral candidate, picked up on this issue, calling for a school building oversight council to “break the silos that stand in the way of planning and realizing school construction projects.”

State Treasurer Steve Grossman, who oversees the school building authority, said Friday he was delighted that a new school is on its way. The state will cover \$36.6 million of the construction costs.

“This one took a good deal of time to bake, but the recipe is a sound one,” Grossman said. “This is the first project that will be built from the ground up exclusively as a STEM/early college school.”

It took an incredible amount of tenacity for the Dearborn and its supporters, including the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization and the Trinity Episcopal Church in Copley Square, to make their dream a reality. The project has evolved from a renovation to an entirely new building and is credited for helping save a school on the brink of closure.

Enrollment had been sliding for years. In 2010, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education designated the Dearborn, which educates many Cape Verdean immigrants still learning English, as “underperforming” because of low MCAS scores.

Although test results and enrollment have been rising, organizers believe a new school could cement its turnaround. Through the years, they have canvassed the neighborhood drumming up support.

At one monumental meeting in April 2010 that drew hundreds, organizers called in the mayor, superintendent, head of the school building authority, and the state treasurer to make commitments to the new school. Two years later, when the project was waning once again, organizers pressed the officials to promise a groundbreaking by spring 2014.

School officials, however, do not expect to meet that deadline. Razing the current building will be a big job, involving the removal of asbestos and the challenges of demolition on a narrow, dense Greenville Street. Supporters understand.

“This is very exciting and concrete and people understand we are moving along,” said the Rev. Liz Walker, pastor of the Roxbury Presbyterian Church. “People who have not known how to trust are learning now to trust promises and their own potential.”

Bruce Thatcher, whose son is a Dearborn eighth-grader, said he cannot wait for the new school and plans to send his daughter there, as well. The family lives seven blocks away.

“Science, technology, engineering, and math — that’s where the new jobs are going to be,” Thatcher said. “Both of my children are very excited to be able to partake in this kind of education.”

The project still faces one more hurdle. In the coming weeks, the City Council will decide on a loan order for the project. Support is already emerging.

“It is absolutely critical that we support this project and the opportunity it will provide for young people in Roxbury as well as the city of Boston to get the best education possible in the latest and greatest facility,” said City Councilor Tito Jackson, who represents Roxbury and chairs the Education Committee.

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