

Rebuilding OA Schools

An update from Dr. Bill Russell, OA superintendent

This update was given during a public meeting of the Owego Apalachin school district Board of Education on Thursday, February 21, 2013.

This update has become a regular feature in the superintendent's report, as Dr. Russell provides the latest information available at each BOE meeting.

"Tonight I'm happy and pleased to offer this report," Dr. Russell began, during the February 21 BOE meeting. He said that within the past week, the OA team, including architects and construction consultants, met with representatives from FEMA. Because the current OES was built in 1965, he said, the district presented to FEMA plans that addressed considerable upgrades that met the current era's codes/standards/regulations.

"We've designed a larger school," he said, "in order to meet the increased educational needs and mandates set forth by New York state and the federal government."

In this meeting with FEMA, much of the morning session was spent going through the plans, room by room, Dr. Russell said. The FEMA representatives agreed, "in very large measure," with the proposed plans. Dr. Russell said that some were challenged, but that most were approved. He said that he went into the meeting knowing that some proposals would be challenged, since this is part of the process and is to be expected.

His pre-meeting estimate of what might be approved was in the 75 percent ballpark, but that when the meeting on the new OES was complete, about 93 percent of the proposals were OK'd, and would be the responsibility of FEMA and New York State's Office of Emergency Management to fund.

The FEMA representatives questioned adding an auditorium in the new elementary school, but also told district officials it would be considered if it could be justified based on other schools recently built in New York state. It was the same when it came to the district's proposal to include a computer lab in the new school. When the old OES was built in the 1960s, there were no such provisions.

FEMA officials also questioned the size of music rooms. Dr. Russell said the district justified this by pointing to the state-mandated Arts Curriculum Standards, and to OA's highly successful music programs, which feed the district's desire to continue to have these programs flourish well into the future. Dr. Russell said he left that meeting with a very short list of questions to answer for the FEMA officials.

“We left the meeting with everything else falling within their responsibility for funding,” he said of the meeting with FEMA and state officials. “In the case of the elementary school, I can’t imagine a scenario in which we’d have had a better outcome.”

Dr. Russell continued to review that meeting, saying that after the group took a break for lunch, they came back together to discuss the proposed new administration building. He said they went through the same process, this time looking at the proposed new building in comparison to the existing building at 36 Talcott Street, which was built in 1912. By the end of the meeting, Dr. Russell said, the officials agreed that the whole of this building, too, would be funded by FEMA and the state of New York.

“So we were two-for-two on that scoreboard,” he said. “There were some technical questions about the way the funding would take place, but for the most part, they were questions about how to fund it, not whether to fund it.”

Dr. Russell said that during this meeting, the maintenance building was not discussed, but he said he does not anticipate many issues once those plans are discussed at a future meeting, due to the fact that the new maintenance facility’s proposed size is about 1,000 square feet smaller than the buildings lost to the flood.

“After months and months of planning, we’re gratified that the FEMA officials were very complimentary of our proposals,” said Dr. Russell. “They said it was obvious to them that we weren’t ‘trying to milk the system’ and that they consider us to be ‘honest brokers’ for our district, our community and the taxpayers here. They left saying that ‘with eyes wide open,’ they would be supporting our project for FEMA funding.”

Dr. Russell said that there was yet another bit of good news to report on this subject, as well. The district has received final approval from FEMA on the demolition of the existing OES. Next up will be engineers’ drawings for the demo, hazardous materials removal, and following those items, putting the demolition out for bid.

Dr. Russell said he expects the demolition to take place by the end of March, or perhaps just into April.

So, when will the elementary school be completed and ready for move-in? Dr. Russell said that this, of course, is one of the most significant questions.

“We’re meeting next week to consider ways to accelerate the construction schedule, now that we know that the design and site are acceptable and will be funded. A more firm construction schedule should follow from that discussion. Once that’s determined, we’ll begin to hold more public meetings where designs and timetables will be shared, especially with the parents of the students who will be attending the new elementary school.”

Linda Frisbie, BOE member, had a follow-up question. She asked if the public had been asked for input regarding environmental assessment studies. Dr. Russell said these had been available for public review, and that the district gave public notice regarding comment. Dr. Russell said the time frame had been 21 days, and during that time frame, there was no public comment regarding the new elementary school being built on fill, in the flood plain.