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## Stew-Stras building funding in latest capital proposal

By **NATHANIEL WEST**, Staff Writer  
[nwest@jg-tc.com](mailto:nwest@jg-tc.com)

STRASBURG -- Two dozen Illinois school districts awaiting state grants promised five years ago are at the "top of the list" in Gov. Rod Blagojevich's plan for school construction funding, according to an administration spokesman.

But officials with the Stewardson-Strasburg school district, who were forced last month to borrow their \$1.3-million share of a \$3.3-million expansion project without the state funding in hand, are not yet celebrating the governor's proposed capital bill.

"I'm not optimistic, but I'm not pessimistic either," said Superintendent Ruth Schneider, who has watched the state back out of funding its share of the Stew-Stras project every year for the past four years.

Stew-Stras voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum in 2002, authorizing the district to sell bonds to pay for the renovation and expansion of the aging school south of Strasburg.

The state had committed to a school construction grant of more than \$2 million, but that money has been delayed year after year.

In fact, the Stew-Stras school board last week voted to sell the construction bonds in anticipation of possible state funding yet this spring or summer. Otherwise, the 2002 referendum would have expired Monday.

"We absolutely waited as long as we could," Schneider said. "But after waiting five years, we could have missed out on it by a few months. The board didn't want to take a chance of that happening."

Preliminary indications suggest wisdom in the Stew-Stras school board's decision.

Blagojevich's new capital spending proposal includes \$1.5 billion for school construction (which is separate from the governor's proposed allocation of \$1.5 billion for public education in next year's budget), including funding "first and foremost" for the 24 school districts awarded grants five years ago, according to Justin DeJong, spokesman for the Governor's Office of Management and Budget.

Those school districts "are at the top of the list, so they can move forward with their construction," DeJong said.

He noted the districts would be reimbursed somewhat for the increase in construction costs over the last five years.

While local Republican legislators have reservations about the Democratic governor's plan, they said they believe the school construction funding can survive the budget process this spring.

"I think it's more likely than not," said state Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon. "I think it's probable we'll get it done. But the governor's put so many issues on the table, we'll have to work hard to make sure it doesn't get lost in the shuffle."

In particular, Righter was skeptical about the as-of-yet unannounced method for funding the Blagojevich capital bill.

"It might very well be that the governor's intention might be to pay for the (construction funding) with a gross receipts tax, but there's nothing in his (proposal) to indicate that," Righter said, adding he thinks such a tax would only harm the Illinois economy.

State Rep. Roger Eddy, a Republican who doubles as superintendent of the Hutsonville school district, continued to fume over the school construction funding delay. He said he has a bill held up in the Rules Committee that would commit about \$150 million to the 24 waiting school districts.

"Obviously, I would hope the governor is finally ready to do something about those schools, but I think that should have already been done," Eddy said.

"I'm optimistic we can work something out. But if the governor continues to do (what) he has done the last few years, I'm afraid the results will be the same. He hasn't passed a capital bill since he's been here."

Schneider said, "I have a wait-and-see attitude. I'm hopeful. I believe the governor and the legislature want money for school construction. I believe they recognize the importance of it.

"It's a matter of both sides being able to come together, and choose how they want to pay for it."

Contact Nathaniel West at [nwest@jg-tc.com](mailto:nwest@jg-tc.com) or 238-6860.

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