



Land purchase approved for CMSD middle school

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Plans to proceed with a new city middle school have been approved.

During an all-day retreat Saturday, the Columbus Municipal School District Board of Trustees approved a request from CMSD Superintendent Dr. Del Phillips to exercise an option to purchase 49.2 acres of property at the intersection of highways 45 North and 373, where a \$20 million city middle school will be built.

Phillips and engineer Kevin Stafford, of Neel-Schaffer, Inc., presented findings from environmental, cultural resource and topographical grading studies, along with general cost estimates, to the school board.

The land will be purchased for \$779,000. Phillips anticipated another \$703,513 in preparation cost, including environmental studies and utility work.

He estimated actual dirt work will be less than \$600,000, keeping total site acquisition and preparation expenses under the \$2.1 million originally planned for the project.

On the property, which will include a 50-foot "buffer" area around the property, two pockets of wetlands exist, but the size of the wetlands — less than a tenth of an acre — mean mitigation is "not extensive nor expensive," Phillips said.

Phillips has received letters of intent to provide service to the property from East Lowndes Water Association, Atmos Energy, Columbus Light and Water and 4-County Electric Power Association.

CLW will provide sewer service to the building; the school board approved a bid for \$94,853.16 for necessary sewer construction.

Additionally, in anticipation of future annexation by the city, CLW recently agreed the school will pay the upfront costs for CLW to provide fire safety.

Phillips compared the utility usage of Hunt and Lee middle schools, which both will be closed. Additionally, he examined the electric bills for New Hope High School, which he characterized as a "little bigger" than the proposed middle school.

"The new (facility) will (have) a computer-controlled, energy efficient system," he said, predicting \$108,000 would be spent, in a year, on utilities for the new facility, versus \$145,000 which is being spent for Hunt Middle School and Lee Middle School, combined.

Acknowledging "if we couldn't manage traffic, we couldn't buy the site," Phillips reported the Mississippi Department of Transportation would install and maintain a traffic signal at the Highway 45 North intersection and he noted plans to install signals on highways 373 and 50 for a cost of \$100,000.

Additionally, he reported dedicated turn lanes would be installed on highways 373 and 50 for a cost of \$250,000.

"(There will be) a long merge area to get on Highway 45," he added, noting construction crews would stockpile dirt on the middle school site to be used to build up the existing Highway 373.

MDOT will maintain the roads around the school and speed limits will be lowered.

The school board also approved a new middle school schematic design.

"We tried to keep an historical perspective," Phillips said, referencing the exterior design of the building, which will boast red brick and white columns to "look a lot like Franklin" Elementary School.

Sixth, seventh and eighth grades will be housed in separate wings of the 143,622-square-foot school, with 18 classrooms in each wing.

The facility also will include 30,452 square feet for a cafeteria and a 407-seat gymnasium, a 17,181-square-foot auditorium and band hall and a 31,267-square-foot administration, library and laboratory space.

Construction on the facility likely will begin in March.