

## Watchdog: Monroe County schools need \$1 billion in repairs

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Scott Wilson, head building custodian, rolls through a small space in the walls of Barclay Elementary School in Brockport. Most of the piping in the school is still wrapped in asbestos. / JAMIE GERMANO / staff photographer

### Findings

- The average age of a school building in Monroe County is 50; two buildings were constructed in the late 1800s; and nine were built before 1912.
- State Building Condition Surveys show the 272 school buildings in Monroe County need more than \$1 billion in upgrades and renovations by

2015.

- 56 of 272 building in the county are rated “unsatisfactory” — although not unsafe — for having old, worn out heating and ventilation systems, old windows, leaky roofs or crumbling mortar joints.
- Those 56 buildings alone require nearly \$255 million in construction and repair.
- All buildings rated “unsatisfactory” are in suburban districts; none are in the City School District.
- Nine of 272 buildings in the county are rated in “excellent” condition.

School construction projects are generally eligible for state reimbursements called “building aid” for certain approved spending on building construction and renovations. Building aid can sometimes lead to the state picking up more than 90 percent of the costs for a district’s project. Voters will weigh in Sept. 20 on a \$19.5 million project in the Brockport Central School District that’s eligible for 90.4 percent reimbursement plus an additional \$657,844 in state Expanding our Children’s Education and Learning aid to offset local costs.

### Findings

56

Number of school district-owned buildings in Monroe County rated “unsatisfactory,” though not unsafe

9

Number of buildings in the county that are rated in “excellent” condition

50

Average age of a school building in Monroe County; two were built in the late 1800s, nine before 1912

### Building aid at a glance

School construction projects are generally eligible for state reimbursements called “building aid” for certain approved spending on building construction and renovations. Building aid can sometimes lead to the state picking up

more than 90 percent of the costs for a district's project. Voters will weigh in Sept. 20 on a \$19.5 million project in the Brockport Central School District that's eligible for 90.4 percent reimbursement plus an additional \$657,844 in state Expanding our Children's Education and Learning aid to offset local costs.

The pool at Pittsford Sutherland High School is leaking and there are cracks in the foundation at Allen Creek Elementary School. At Gates Chili's Walt Disney Elementary School, some of the fiberboard heating ductwork is falling apart.

These problems and more are among those outlined in the most recent round of Building Condition Surveys filed by local school districts with the state Education Department. The assessments are due every five years from schools in the state, excluding New York City, which has its own maintenance survey program in place.

Analysis of the surveys shows about 20 percent of the 272 school buildings in Monroe County are rated as being in "unsatisfactory" condition; and schools in this county alone account for about 9 percent — or \$1 billion — of the estimated repair and renovation dollars needed in the state's schools by 2015.

It's a cost that ultimately falls on the taxpayers.

### RocDocs: School building inspection reports

The "unsatisfactory" ratings don't mean any particular building is unsafe, but do show that at least one critical system in the building has become unreliable or has exceeded its useful life. According to the state's classification rules, the rating means repair or replacement of some or all components is needed.

"For example, a ceiling system is unsatisfactory because it is stained, perhaps sagging, has missing ceiling tiles, and so on," said Carl Thurnau, director of the state Office of Facilities Planning. "That is not unsafe, just unsightly."

Likewise, a "satisfactory" rating does not mean a system or building is maintenance-free: that rating is given to still-reliable systems that are nonetheless in need of routine maintenance or repair.

"School buildings are just like any other, like your home, always in need of maintenance," said John Abbott, deputy superintendent of the East Irondequoit Central School District. "During one of our last construction projects, I had someone call and ask why we keep doing roofs? And when will we be done with them? We are never going to be done. We have about 450,000 square feet of roof and we're not going to replace all of it at once."

The surveys require districts to hire an outside professional to review every aspect of a building, from the foundation to the roof.

They do not assess whether a building is adequate for student educational needs, but focus solely on the physical conditions of the structures.

For the most part, schools rated "unsatisfactory" here are so graded because of crumbling parking lots, deteriorating sidewalks, old boilers or antiquated ventilation systems.

The surveys also point out numerous old and leaky roofs, weather-worn windows and a seemingly unending supply of exterior bricks in need of new mortar joints, a process called "repointing."

### Prioritizing needs

According to the Building Condition Surveys, none of the unsatisfactory-rated schools are in the City School District, but the Pittsford Central School District has 10. That's every district building except the 2006-built Calkins Road Middle School.

In all, the district has \$84 million in needs. Documents show the Pittsford Sutherland High School pool is leaking; the boilers at Jefferson Road Elementary School are at the end of their useful life; and the foundation at Allen Creek has structural cracks.

There, as in all districts, the Building Condition Surveys are an integral part of how officials prioritize repairs and develop long-term capital renovation plans, said district spokeswoman Nancy Wayman. Pittsford school leaders hope to have a project package ready for voters in December.

In Brockport, the Building Condition Surveys were used as a basis to help put together a \$19.5 million project package residents will vote on Sept. 20. The project would include roof repairs, drainage fixes, new insulation, installation of a wireless network, converting steam heating to hot water heating and reconstruction of some athletic fields.

“We are looking to do necessary work here, and the majority of it comes from the survey,” said Darrin Winkley, Brockport’s assistant superintendent for business.

Michael Mamo, school business official in the Gates Chili Central School District, acknowledged his district’s surveys outline \$146 million of needs, the largest in the county. That includes calling for a new auditorium and a total of \$43 million in work at the the high school alone.

“Some of that is kind of ‘wish list’ type of stuff, like a new auditorium,” Mamo said. “But sometimes you have to put stuff like that in there even if there’s no real chance of doing it in the near future because items that aren’t in the surveys are often not eligible for state aid.”

By carefully hewing to state Education Department rules for obtaining building aid, Brockport officials came up with a plan where the local tax impact of their newly proposed project would add about \$23 per year for 17 years to the school tax bill of the owner of a home assessed at \$100,000, excluding STAR exemptions.

Superintendent Lesli Myers said the aim was to make fixes that protected the health, welfare and safety of students and maximized state aid reimbursements.

#### National problem

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, New York’s deep backlog of needed school repairs isn’t an anomaly: in its 2009 Report Card for American Infrastructure, the group estimated the nation’s schools were in need of at least \$160 billion in five-year reconstruction funding, with only \$125 billion in work likely to occur. The National Education Association estimates more than \$300 billion is needed to modernize and repair school buildings nationwide. The Society of Civil Engineers gave American schools an overall grade of “D.”

The group says the country can’t continue to kick its infrastructure needs to the future.

“Crumbling infrastructure has a direct impact on our personal and economic health, and the nation’s infrastructure crisis is endangering our future prosperity,” said ASCE president D. Wayne Klotz, in a statement. He called for greater investment in projects such as school reconstruction, not only to ensure all buildings are in good condition, but also as a way to help boost the nation’s economy.

His agency advocates for a greater federal role in providing funding for infrastructure repairs.

But school officials said more federal money seems unlikely, and they will continue to rely on state reimbursements in order to get their work done.

Generally, state aid often covers upward of 80 percent of qualified school construction projects, with higher reimbursements for less wealthy districts.

While not covering all of the needed fixes across the state, Albany officials have significantly increased education department aid for building projects since a 1997 report by then-Comptroller H. Carl McCall noted that decades of deferring maintenance had allowed the state’s “school facilities to degenerate to a crisis situation.”

There was a 10 percent bump in building aid for districts that led to a construction boom in the early 2000s, and in

the years since, the state has been offering Expanding Our Children's Education and Learning aid to offset costs for new technology, health and safety projects.

In all, building aid for schools has doubled from about \$1.2 billion annually in the early 2000s to \$2.6 billion for the 2011-12 school year.

Keep chipping away

Parma resident John Chart, who lives in the Hilton Central School District, said any school's condition crisis is, and was, self-created. He said there's only so much the average taxpayer can bear.

"I think all that stuff should be included in the regular budget," he said. "I think all they're doing is just asking for extra money. They're putting off things they should be taking care of until they become monumental and then it costs more to fix it: you just don't wait until your car won't start to get it tuned up."

Greece Central School District Board of Education President Julia VanOrman said it's not that simple. She said when school districts are faced with the choice between keeping teachers or programs for students versus spending money on replacement equipment, it's sometimes the better choice to eke out a few more years out of the equipment.

In all, local schools have largely opted to put together frequent, smaller building projects for voter approval. The Greece district last year decided to break \$150 million in construction work into a series of smaller projects. The district will avoid significant property tax increases by paying for the work with a mix of reserve funds and state aid. Voters approved the first phase, a \$34.5 million project that will begin in 2013, in December.

Traditionally, Monroe County voters have been mostly receptive to building construction requests:

- Churchville-Chili is in the midst of a multi-year \$56 million project voters approved in 2008.
- Work got under way this summer at Honeoye Falls-Lima, where voters approved a \$32.4 million project in 2009.
- East Irondequoit has been finishing up the third phase of its \$72 million "generational project;" work will begin next year on a \$34.5 million project voters approved in 2011, on the heels of a \$21.4 million project approved in 2007.

And, a \$325 million reconstruction project is under way in Rochester to not only ensure its facilities remain in good repair, but also to modify buildings to meet modern needs for instructional spaces and programs.

Ultimately, lawmakers approved spending \$1.2 billion in state and city money over 15 years to bring Rochester's buildings into the 21st century. The project, which calls for modernizing all 50 city schools, will be the largest public works project in the city's history.

VanOrman said it just isn't feasible to expect Greece taxpayers to foot the bill all at once for all the fixes her district's school buildings need.

"We really felt, after looking at where the economy is at and all the work we needed to have done, to address it over years," she said. "We felt it made more sense to break the project up, and first address major issues of health and safety. It would be easier for the community and more manageable to get out and support smaller multi-year projects."

Winkley expressed similar sentiments.

"There's no way we can get to all the work that needs to be done, we've got to come out with a reasonable package," he said. "We will continue to chip away at things."

Access denied