

Worcester Business Journal



Public School Building Projects Fill State's Pipeline

Towns look for deals in a depressed construction market

By Matthew L. Brown
Worcester Business Journal Staff Writer
Yesterday

There are currently 40 Central Massachusetts public school building projects in the Massachusetts School Building Authority's capital pipeline.

They range from completed repair work to massive, new urban and suburban high school construction projects with budgets approaching \$100 million. (Click here to see all the local public school building projects in Central Massachusetts.)

According to construction firms, the school building market has been relatively stable for a number of years, but could begin getting busier if the economy remains in the doldrums.

"The last few years have been slower than typical, but we're starting to see more coming out now," said Anthony Consigli, president of Consigli Construction Co. Inc. of Milford. The predicted increase in business is the result of legwork done well in advance, Consigli said.

Consigli is currently working on two public school projects, the Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, an \$85 million project and the Roger L. Putnam Vocational High School in Springfield, which has an estimated budget of \$100 million.

"For any contractor, your antennas had to be up a year ago, before the recession," he said. "We've been watching this for a while, and if you haven't, you're kind of late to the game."

School projects vary greatly in scope and cost, and always have. What may prompt one school to begin planning for an entirely new facility could prompt another to consider repairs. The state recently agreed to fund 40 percent of Wayland's new high school. The project has been 10 years in the works and is expected to cost more than \$70 million.

For any district considering a project, now may be the right time to do it, Consigli said.

"Towns and the state want to push these projects through, and they're wise to push these things now. They're getting a 10 or 20 percent discount off what it would've been a year ago, and the key is timing," Consigli said.



Consigli Construction of Milford is currently working on two public school building projects, including the \$85 million Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, pictured above.

Daniel Morgado, Shrewsbury town manager, agreed with Consigli. Shrewsbury has built two new schools and renovated another in the last 12 years and currently has a new middle school in the MSBA capital pipeline.

The town is expecting to pay in the vicinity of \$47 million for the project.

"We've had a lot of interest from contractors because of the lack of work," Morgado said.

Morgado said Shrewsbury wants to put the new Sherwood Middle School out to bid in March 2011.

Michael Pagano of Lamoreux Pagano Architects in Worcester said the state's moratorium on school construction resulted in pent up demand for schools.

"There's really quite a bit of activity, and probably more coming. This is probably just the beginning," Pagano said.

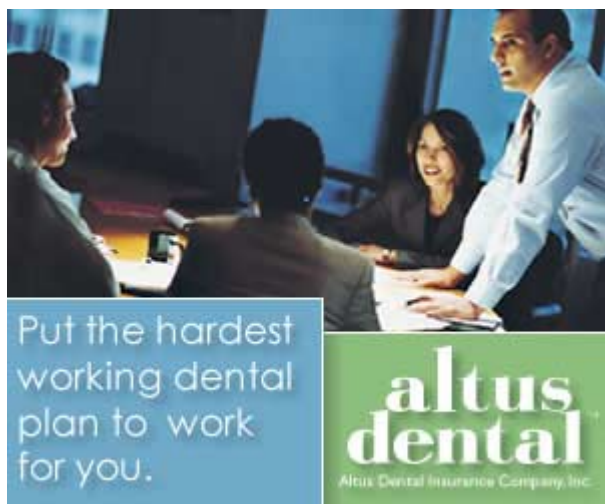
The end of the state moratorium is only one factor in that acceleration, though. Massachusetts, despite a bit of a school building boom in the 1980s and 1990s, still has a large number of very old school buildings. And modern building rules and regulations make renovating those buildings as schools more costly than simply building something brand new.

Currently, Pagano is involved with four public school projects.

"We're still looking for work, we're not overburdened," Pagano said, noting that it takes about six months for an architecture firm to get a project to the drawing board fully designed and with cost estimates.

The time is well spent, though.

"In the past, there was not a lot of oversight until the building was ready to be occupied. This is a much more controlled process in the beginning, and it's better. It's much more accurate," Pagano said.



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