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## Survey: Voters unclear on need for high school

By **John Hilliard**/ Daily News Staff

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**W**AYLAND -- Officials said the failed high school project met largely with opposition and misunderstanding from residents who completed a recent townwide survey.

"People didn't buy, didn't see or didn't understand the project in front of them," said Dianne Bladon, a member of the High School Building Committee.

Meanwhile, the future of the building committee remains unclear after members raised concerns that the board should change before developing another high school project.

"We need to add other faces to the committee (with) divergent views," said member Mary Lentz.

Last January, voters shot down \$4.2 million to design a new Wayland High School during a special election. The failed school project -- with an estimated \$57.3 million price tag -- was backed by residents who pointed to the existing school's "deteriorating" condition, cramped quarters and inadequate health and safety features.

But critics slammed the project's cost and claimed lower-priced alternatives were not considered as seriously as the \$57.3 million project. They also question whether the town should design a new school before the state's school building assistance reimbursement regulations are established in 2006.

The panel conducted a survey from June to November to learn voter opinions about the failed school project. Of more than 7,900 surveys mailed to voters who participated in elections during the previous two years, 2,075 -- 26 percent -- were returned.

During a presentation last week, the board reported 65 percent of survey respondents believe the current school is "inadequate" for today's needs, and 88 percent believe the town should address code compliance issues at the facility.

But the proposed 57.3 million project was too costly, said 68 percent of the respondents, while 59 percent called that project too big for the town's needs.

The committee noted most of the surveys were not returned, though, so "it cannot be assumed that survey respondents are representative of all active voters," according to the board's report.

"There was found to be a fairly significant over-representation of project nonsupporters or 'no' voters among survey respondents," the report also noted, and a major concern for residents appeared to be whether Wayland would have received state financial backing to build a new high school.

But residents who completed the survey were not clear on the project's anticipated costs.

According to the report, "those who did respond gave estimates that ranged from less than half the HSBC/Finance Committee estimates to more than triple."

"Cost may not have been understood with this," said Bladon, who oversaw the compilation of survey results.

Chairwoman Lea Anderson said her board released tax impact and state reimbursement information in cost ranges which depending on levels of state assistance.

"It's a very complicated issue the way we put together the numbers," said Anderson. "You couldn't make it simple."

She said the committee offered public presentations and tours of the existing high school to demonstrate why the project was needed, but admitted many more residents cast their votes than attended the hearings.

"I think there was an attempt (from) the High School Building Committee to make the needs of the high school understood," she said.

Anderson backs adding fresh faces to the board who may disagree with the past school proposals, but believes disbanding the board completely would eliminate

"If (disbanding the building committee) is what's best for the project, I'm for it," said Anderson. "If it were my decision, I would not disband the entire committee."

The group's future has to be decided by the School Committee, which appoints most of the board's members. School Committee Chairman Jeff Dieffenbach said his board will meet with the building committee in the near future.

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"I think we're open to all suggestions on how to move the high school project forward," he said.

Dieffenbach said the town will focus on addressing issues raised by a recent New England Association of Schools and Colleges report that pointed out several problems with space, infrastructure and accessibility at the high school. The NEASC requires a special progress report from Wayland by April 1 explaining how the town will address those issues.

"We as a school system can't solve this problem ourselves," said high school principal Charles Ruopp. "It comes back to the whole community."

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