

Cleveland Street School fails to make cut

State declines to fund renovation, expansion project

By Chris Sykes
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The state School Development Authority has announced it will recommend the funding of 10 new schools in New Jersey's neediest public districts. Orange, however, was not included.

Even though Cleveland Street School was on the list of 52 facilities the authority was considering building under former Gov. Jon Corzine, it was not on the list of 10 approved projects announced Feb. 15 by Gov. Chris Christie.

The Cleveland project was designed to double the size of the existing century-old school. It was to include additional classrooms, including those specifically for science and the arts.

Plans for the project have sat for nearly a decade since the authority's predecessor, the Schools Development Corp., was founded in 2000. It was not selected in early rounds of funding as was the new Rosa Parks School, or for renovations and expansions like the Park Avenue and Lincoln Avenue schools.

Assemblywoman Mila Jasey is a member of the Assembly Education Committee and a former member of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education. Jasey said the rejection of Cleveland caused her to react with "shock."

"If this school does not qualify for funding under the governor's

new 'prioritization system,' then I cannot wait to see what standards this system is based upon," said Jasey. "I hope that the governor lives up to his promise to provide complete 'transparency' when it comes to his prioritization system so that we can determine if this is truly a merit-based system."

Jasey said she was told during a recent visit to the school that classrooms do not warm up until the afternoon because of the outdated boiler. In addition, students eat in a small basement cafeteria after they are served lunches in an adjacent hallway.

Christie said the results of a "comprehensive review" resulted in the recommendation to advance 10 projects this year located in Bridgeton, Elizabeth, Long Branch, New Brunswick, Newark and West New York, and two each in Jersey City and Paterson. Nearly \$584 million will be funded through money remaining from previous bond issues.

Christie said the review process was part of his administration's "complete revamping" of the authority's construction program. He said it was designed to bring "accountability to the spending of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars annually for school improvements and expansion."

"We all know that the prior program was associated with the absolute worst kind of government

waste, mismanagement and lack of supervision, where much was promised, too much was spent, but too little was returned," Christie said.

"I could not responsibly or in good conscience let that history repeat itself at this agency. We will move forward smartly and deliberately to deliver value to the school districts and to our taxpayers."

Christie said the new program embodies fundamental reforms. The recommendations will be presented to the authority's board for review.

Orange was not the only Essex County district to have a project rejected. Irvington's Madison Avenue Elementary School was also among the 52 projects under consideration.

Irvington Mayor Wayne Smith said despite the discussion about "school reform," he believed it meant nothing unless the state was willing to build new schools where he said they were needed the most.

"We're busing kids over to the Mount Vernon Avenue School campus because we don't have the proper facilities on the other side of town for them, and the community was anticipating a new school being built in town," Smith said. "The governor announced 10 new school that are going to be built, but Irvington was not one of them. I think, if you look at the models for



An expansion and renovation project for the Cleveland Street School, which was one of the more than 50 plans under consideration by the state School Development Authority, was not include among the 10 selected last week to receive funding for construction.

school reform and improvement that work, they all included facilities renovation and upgrades."

Paul Inman, president of Irvington's school board, agreed with Smith.

"We're waiting for Madison Avenue School to be rebuilt and we were hoping that Madison Avenue

was on the governor's list," he said. "I'm hoping that if the governor can come and see our issues in person, maybe he will add us to his list of priorities when it comes to allocating the limited resources and funding he says is available."

Managing Editor John Zucal contributed to this article.