

## **City school upgrades set back by lack of state funding**

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Time ran out on legislation authorizing the \$615 million next phase of Rochester school improvement projects.

And local lawmakers are pointing fingers at who is to blame.

The lack of state action comes amid intensifying debate locally about the future of the school district, and growing calls for reform — including a November referendum on district oversight.

Failing to move forward on the modernization projects this legislative session could have significant ramifications, officials said, disrupting a steady progression of work ongoing since 2012. The schools modernization program is the largest public project in city history, estimated to total more than \$1.3 billion in work. This third phase was to be the largest stage of construction.

“You can’t start planning anything until the legislation gets passed,” said Mike Schmidt, chief operating officer for the district and vice chairman of the board overseeing the modernization projects. “If it goes through next June, you don’t start work until the summer of 2021.

The disruption could interrupt planning and construction timing, result in lost jobs, and push back the timeline for schools that need to be renovated.

No students would be stranded in swing space, however, as there is no project overlap with Phase III like there was with the current phase.

“All our projects are on time, everything’s on budget, we’re cutting ribbons at a record pace,” Schmidt said, optimistic that the Legislature might act early next session. “It’ll be frustrating for the community to have to wait on this, that’s for sure.”

### **Legislation not submitted until May 29**

School board members endorsed the slate of Phase III projects back in December. But Assemblyman David Gantt, D-Rochester, and Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, didn’t submit the authorizing legislation until May 29. The bills stalled in committee.

With the legislative session winding down Thursday, city leaders were holding out that something still could be done. Said Warren spokesman Justin Roj: “All parties should work diligently to pass the legislation this session, so that our kids can have the facilities they deserve and the families can have the jobs that they need to provide for the well-being of our children.”

But Bronson said the schools modernization bill came in too late for it to be fully vetted. Legislative staff also were unable to get some details back from the modernization board and the school district in time for the bill to be considered, Bronson said.

District officials said all requested information was provided.

“There was simply not enough time to move it forward,” Bronson said Wednesday. “In addition, the language in this version is considerably different than the language used in Phase 2 and Phase 1. There were some concerns that the state Education Department would not be receptive to those changes.”

Bronson said the city’s delegation will have to work with the school district to ensure the ongoing construction work is not stymied by the delay in getting the bill passed, saying he is confident it could get adopted next year

when lawmakers return to Albany.

“I don’t know exactly what the timing is. My understanding is they wanted to get it done so there would not be any delays,” he said Gantt, however, blamed Bronson, saying he blocked or slow-walked the legislation, or so he was told by district officials. For his part, Robach thought there was “plenty of time” to deal with the legislation, and said he asked the Democratic majority in the Senate to bring the matter to the floor for a vote. He was told that wouldn’t happen, however, if the Assembly wasn’t going to act, he said.

“I don’t know why,” Gantt said of why the bill stalled, but also why it didn’t get introduced sooner. “People need jobs.”

A spokesman for Bronson called Gantt’s allegation “preposterous,” adding that they only learned of the modernization funding bill when they saw an alert from the legislative database system. Bronson then convened the various education, legal and other staffers needed to gather the necessary documentation and vet the legislation.

### **Early stages beset by problems**

School renovations include technology and security upgrades, changes to classroom space, enlarged gymnasiums and other amenities such as air conditioning and community meeting space.

The first phase of work was beset by problems. Work on the second phase is finishing up, with construction on Schools 2, 4 and 10 to be completed by summer 2020. Final close out of all contracts was not projected until 2021-22, Schmidt said. The third phase would include districtwide technology upgrades and 15 school projects, notably No 3, 9, 19, grade schools (including work at attached recreation centers), School 29 and the Douglass, Edison, Wilson Commencement, East and Monroe campuses.

A fourth and fifth phase of work still are expected, in which the city hopes to get funding for improving the soccer stadium as it transitions to a youth sports facility and becomes more closely aligned with the district.

Legislation proposed by Assemblyman Harry Bronson, D-Rochester, seeking to push changes suggested by a state-appointed distinguished educator, failed to garner consensus among the local delegation and similarly died in committee. Back here in Rochester, City Council this week signed off on Mayor Lovely Warren’s push for a nonbinding November referendum that would invite a state takeover of the district.

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**Shawn Rucker, inspector/air control project monitor, leaves a containment zone as he works on April 3 at the modernization project at East High School in Rochester. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**