

Birch Grove school concrete is worse than expected

By Eric Bedner

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TOLLAND — An engineering report on the condition of Birch Grove Primary School's crumbling foundation has determined the issue is worse than expected, and town officials are saying the building must be replaced beginning in 2020.

Town Manager Steven R. Werbner and School Superintendent Walter Willett outlined the new findings and their future plans in a Friday email to residents. Town officials have been visually monitoring the condition of the school's foundation for well over a year after first noticing spider-like cracks often associated with concrete deterioration due to pyrrhotite.

Birch Grove, which houses pre-kindergarten through Grade 2, is a 90,000-square-foot structure built in two phases with the first phase done in 1999 and the second in 2003. About six months ago, the Board of Education hired Silva Engineering to test core samples and to provide a comprehensive report on the laboratory analysis.

A 200-plus-page report from Jan. 10 determined that the 1999 section of the building has substantial external cracking from the presence of pyrrhotite and the results of the interior core samples show even more oxidation, according to town officials.

Werbner and Willett wrote in the email that their concern is that over time, the condition will worsen, "which could impact the structural integrity of the build-

ing." Although there is not an immediate safety concern, they said, it would take about two years to design and construct repairs. The engineer is recommending that Tolland officials begin the design process immediately so construction can start in early 2020. Because the building has a steel frame, the only option is to demolish the entire structure and build a new school, Werbner said.

Architects are examining the use of portable classrooms located on site as a temporary option to house classrooms during the construction period, he said.

If construction were to start just after January 2020, the process would take about two years, Werbner said.

It's expected the project will cost as much as \$46 million, but the state has agreed to assist financially and assume 52 percent of the cost.

The remaining cost would be the responsibility of the town, according to town officials. Further financial assistance could come from the federal government thanks to legislation cham-

pioned by U.S. Rep. Joseph D. Courtney, D-2nd District.

Under his amendment to a larger education bill, the federal government would create a grant program for schools to replace or repair foundations that are deteriorating due to pyrrhotite. The amendment requires the state to contribute at least 40 percent of a project's total cost and the federal government then would contribute more than half.

Theoretically, if the federal legislation passes, the town could be reimbursed the entire cost, but Werbner said he expected the process in Washington, D.C., to take too long for Tolland officials to wait.

Town officials are planning a town-wide referendum for May to approve the project with the hope the town would be reimbursed for its costs not covered by the state.

Bonding resolutions would have to be considered by the Town Council in March, and as part of the process, a building committee will have to be appointed, according to Werbner and Willett.

While the 2003 section of the school is showing evidence of pyrrhotite, deterioration is not as bad as the other section, so it could be possible to use that space for students while construction is taking place on the first section, according to town officials. However, "both portions of the building will have to be replaced as part of this project," Werbner and Willett wrote. "Portable classrooms may also be needed in the interim."

As a result of the engineer's report, Willett wrote on Jan. 16 to Kotsa Diamanti, director of school construction for the state, requesting emergency funding status for the school. The Department of Administrative Services' then-Commissioner Melody Currey responded on Jan. 18, granting the designation of emergency status and waived state requirements for competitive bidding, according to town officials.

In order to qualify as an emergency, a project must be immediately necessary to address extreme unforeseen circumstances.

Manchester police officer arrested in domestic violence case

By Journal Inquirer Staff

MANCHESTER — Local police arrested one of their own Friday in connection with a domestic violence incident that occurred last July, Police Chief William Darby said.

Officer Jason Wagner, 40, was charged with second-degree unlawful restraint and disorderly conduct, Darby said.

Wagner was placed on paid administrative leave Jan. 23 while a criminal investigation was conducted, Darby said. An internal investigation into his conduct is ongoing.

After turning himself in, Wagner was released on a \$5,000 non-surety bond and is scheduled to appear in Manchester Superior Court on Monday.

He has been a Manchester

police officer since May 2002. In 2009, Wagner was named officer of the year, but was cited for "inappropriate behavior" in July 2013 and suspended from field training for one year.

In 2017, Wagner was named in a federal lawsuit filed by a female police officer alleging years of discrimination and retaliation against her.