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Levy Offers Pared-Down School Construction Plan

By YILU ZHAO

Faced with a huge gap in the construction budget, Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy proposed yesterday that the building of new schools or annexes be limited to 21 in the city's most crowded districts. He also requested that repairs be made only to schools so dilapidated that they posed safety hazards.

Eleven other construction projects in less crowded districts, originally included in the current five-year capital budget, would be delayed at least until the start of the next budget plan in 2004.

Students in neighborhoods where schools would be delayed would continue to take classes in makeshift spaces cut out of gymnasiums, dining halls and libraries.

In presenting his plan to the Board of Education yesterday, Mr. Levy seemed to have the support of the majority of the board's seven members.

"We have a crisis," said Terri Thomson, the board member from Queens, "and this is a triage."

Ninfa Segarra, the president of the board and a Giuliani appointee, has called for a meeting on Friday or Monday for board members to vote on the proposal.

New school buildings are proposed for only the most crowded districts.

Only $1.9 billion is left in the capital budget to complete the current construction plan, which was priced at $4.3 billion for the 32 projects. It is clear to the board members that the city has more pockets of crowded schools and more crumbling school buildings than the budget can address.

While board members have known for months that some projects would have to be postponed for this capital plan, the decision about which ones to delay was difficult. Since five people on the board are appointed by their borough presidents and have to answer to local interests, members have competed to save projects in their boroughs.

"The kind of choices we have to make are too awful for words," Mr. Levy said. "We have to choose between seats and libraries, laboratories and gyms.

"This plan attempts to put order to the process by building classrooms where there are the greatest needs and classrooms are the priority," he added.

In an effort to show fairness and reduce contention, Mr. Levy depended on a simple criterion to decide which new school construction projects would remain on the budget plan: the level of crowding.

Queens, the borough with the most crowded schools, appears to be the biggest winner, with 14 of the original 19 schools for the borough remaining on Mr. Levy's construction plan. In a ranking established by the board, a district formed by Queens high schools was found to need the largest number of new seats. The second most crowded, also in Queens, is District 24, which comprises Elmhurst, Maspeth, Middle Village and Glendale.

The population of Queens grew 11 percent in the past decade to 2.2 million, according to the 2000 census. But only 11 schools were built in the borough during the 1990's.

The board members and the chancellor could leave to their successors the difficult choices of which schools to build and which to delay, Ms. Segarra said, but that would be

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