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Divided Ed Board OKs trimmed building plan

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After a brief public shouting match and a flurry of eleventh-hour deals yesterday, a bitterly divided Board of Education narrowly approved a school construction plan that was stripped of dozens of promised projects.

Schools Chancellor Harold Levy and the board were forced to trim $2.4 billion from the capital plan because of a budgeting fiasco that promised considerably more new buildings than there was money to finance.

How the board arrived at its 4-to-3 vote was hardly a smooth journey.

At one point yesterday, board President Ninfa Segarra accused Levy of selling out the integrity of his plan to win votes from Manhattan and the Bronx.

"We stuck to the principles," Levy countered.

Segarra, fellow mayoral appointee Irene Impellizzeri and Staten Island representative Jerry Cammarata voted against Levy's plan. Those who voted for it were Greg Brooks (Brooklyn), Terri Thomson (Queens), Irving Hamer (Manhattan) and Sandra Lerner (Bronx).

"Politics took center stage," Segarra said.

The board will spend $1.9 billion to complete the list of projects, which includes 14 new schools in Queens and a handful of other new projects throughout the city, except Staten Island.

"We had an opportunity to help all of the boroughs, and it was rejected," Segarra said.

She had said she would support Levy's plan but changed her vote after Mayor Giuliani and Staten Island Borough President Guy Molinari lobbied her to include a new school for that borough.

Segarra was unsuccessful in trying to persuade enough board members to transfer money from a new Queens high school to build a middle school on Staten Island.

But Levy did appease Hamer and Lerner to secure their votes.

To win Hamer's vote, the altered plan diverted $35 million from Queens construction projects to Manhattan districts to use toward leasing space for new schools. The switch was made possible because of city money that became available to pay for the construction of Frank Sinatra High School in Queens.

Lerner's vote was assured by restoring $40 million in renovations for Public School 31 in the Bronx. The school had been included as an $80 million construction project in the original plan but was cut out by Levy.

The landmark school, known as the Castle on the Hill, is on the Grand Concourse in a neighborhood with that has 3,000 more seats than students.

Sources said the $40 million will not be enough to complete the needed work — meaning more funds eventually would be required.

"I wanted in the worst way to avoid politics as usual," said Levy, who acknowledged that some of the changes were made to secure enough votes for passage.



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NOT ALWAYS EYE TO EYE **Board of Education President Ninfa Segarra clashed with Schools Chancellor Harold Levy before a divided board approved $1.9 billion capital plan yesterday.**

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