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School Construction Plan Squeaks By

In 4-3 vote, strong objections over dearth of projects on Staten Island

By Nick Chiles
STAFF WRITER

Schools Chancellor Harold Levy's revised school construction plan was narrowly approved by the Board of Education Friday over the vehement objections of the Staten Island board member and his two allies, who were upset because the borough will get no new schools.

The tense board meeting was marked by angry exchanges between Levy and two of the board members who voted against his plan, Board of Education president Ninfa Segarra and Staten Island board member Jerry Cammarata. The third vote against Levy's plan was provided by vice president Irene Impellizzeri. The plan passed by a 4-3 vote.

The plan puts 11 school construction projects on hold because the board's five-year, $7.75-billion capital plan is over budget. In selecting which of 32 projects would be delayed, Levy said he based his decision on which districts were more overcrowded and which projects already had an approved site.

Cammarata and Segarra charged that the other board members and Levy engaged in behind-the-scenes maneuvering to throw another project to Manhattan to gain a fourth vote, that of Manhattan board member, Irving Hamer.

Cammarata argued that Staten Island should have had at least one new school in the construction plan because the borough got 3 percent of the projects in the original capital plan passed in 1999 and that proportion should continue.

"To make the argument that Staten Island is underutilized is a false argument," an angry Cammarata said to Levy. "Staten Island gets treated like an underdog, like a stepchild as always."

In voting against the plan, Segarra said she was continuing the tradition started by her predecessor, former president William Thompson (now the city comptroller-elect), who voted against the original capital plan. At one point, Segarra sarcastically accused Levy of "doing a little act" in public when he already had secured the votes he needed behind the scenes.

It was money from the City Council that gave Levy room to barter. The board received a letter Wednesday from City Council Speaker Peter Vallone and Finance committee chairman Herb Berman informing the board that the City Council was sending $150 million for five school construction projects, including $35 million for Frank Sinatra High School in Queens. Levy was expecting the council money but didn't know when it would come. So Queens board member Terri Thompson agreed to move $35 million from the allocation for the Sinatra High School that already was in the plan and use it to lease and renovate a building for another Manhattan high school.

In order for them to support the plan, Segarra and Cammarata had lobbied Thompson to give up a Queens high school and allow the Staten Island project, IS 43, to go forward. But Thompson refused.

"Let's make it clear — that was an opportunity to meet the needs of all five boroughs," Segarra said.

Thompson said Queens high schools are so overcrowded — some at 200 percent capacity — that she had "no justification" for going along with Segarra and Cammarata's plan. In addition to Hamer and Thompson, Levy's plan got the votes of Bronx member Sandra Lerner and Brooklyn member Greg Brooks.

After the plan passed, Levy said the "painful reality" is that the plan does not come close to meeting the needs of children across the city because most school districts — including Staten Island — are still overcrowded, with schools having to use libraries and gyms as classrooms.

Levy said the Manhattan project was next in line to get leasing money.

"Economists call it the beggar's dilemma," Levy said. "Everyone is needy here. The question is which need comes first."

After the meeting, Segarra also said that she had been instructed by City Hall to notify Manhattan borough president C. Virginia Fields and the just-elected borough presidents from Queens and the Bronx, Helen Marshall and Adolfo Carrion Jr., respectively, that they wouldn't be allowed to appoint themselves to the Board of Education, in the opinion of the city's corporation counsel, because it would be a conflict of interest.

However, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani on Friday said he disagreed with that interpretation of the law, saying they should be able to get a waiver to serve in both capacities — just as he gave a waiver to Segarra when she was also deputy mayor.

"It makes more sense — it would remove the middleman," Giuliani said.

Marshall said she had yet to receive the letter from corporation counsel. But she added that even if she is advised not to appoint herself to the board, she has until July — when she will have to replace Thompson — to figure out what she will do.

Staff writer Dan Janison contributed to this story.

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