

State gives \$800K boost to Natick High project

By Charlie Breitrose/Daily News staff, MetroWest Daily News, Jan 23, 2010

NATICK — The state will give the town an extra \$800,000, or more, for the new high school project because of Natick's effort to promote Smart Growth projects.

Natick would become the first community to take advantage of such incentives.

School officials expected to receive about 52 percent of the cost of building the high school from the Massachusetts School Building Authority, said School Committee Chairman Dirk Coburn, but the state awarded an extra percentage point as a result of the town's Smart Growth initiative.

"We are the first community in the commonwealth to earn a Smart Growth point," Coburn said. "Because the base for calculations is \$82 million, each percent is worth \$820,000."

Smart Growth encourages building housing and retail projects near town centers and close to public transportation, said Planning Board Chairman Robert Foster

"It encourages building housing close to downtown so residents can walk there, and close to transit so people can walk to the train," Foster said. "Also, by putting denser housing in an area already developed, you don't develop land on the outskirts of town. Plus, it has affordable housing units."

Natick started with a base reimbursement rate of 43.63 percent and also received 5 additional percentage points for using the model school program, 2 for having an energy-efficient project and 1 for exemplary maintenance, Coburn said. While the district applied for the Smart Growth credit, Coburn said school officials didn't count on getting the money.

"We weren't sure if we would get it. It had never been awarded before," Coburn said. "It had a particular set of fairly detailed criteria, including assessing where the project stood."

The project that qualified Natick for the state funds is planned for the former Natick Paperboard Factory site, and would have 138 apartments and 12 townhouses. It gained approval from the Planning Board and other town boards, but it has been delayed by a recent state Department of Environmental Protection ruling after neighbors appealed the town's decisions.

The Natick Planning Board began working on Smart Growth zoning in 2006, and in the fall, Town Meeting approved the zoning for the former Paperboard site, Foster said.

When it worked on rezoning the area, Foster said, the Planning Board did not know other financial benefits could be coming down the road.

"I'm glad that the School Building Authority people are giving us credit for pursuing Smart Growth," Foster said. "This is not one of the benefits I envisioned when we passed Smart Growth, but it's great."

Natick's Community Development Director Patrick Reffett said gaining approval for the Smart Growth zoning turned out to be a major challenge.

"It had been a long, difficult process but we did it, and the Planning Board was highly instrumental in being able to achieve that," Reffett said. "We were told by people endlessly that we would not get the money out of the state that had been promised, but we did, and we never get the credit."

The state gave the town \$200,000 when the Paperboard project was zoned for Smart Growth, and another \$414,000 will be coming later, Reffett said.

Money from the School Building Authority is yet another victory.

"The state awarded us \$200,000, and here the School Building Authority has given us \$800,000 toward the high school reimbursement. It is very exciting," Reffett said. "It is job well done by Planning Board and the Town Meeting members and (the Community Development) office. We are proud we could get that."

The high school project has not yet gained approval from the School Building Authority, but Natick officials will meet with them Wednesday, Coburn said. They expect to get a budget approved at the meeting.

Then Town Meeting would have to approve borrowing money for the construction during special Town Meeting, which begins Tuesday.

Voters will be asked to approve funding for the town's portion of the high school project at the March 30 town election.

(Charlie Breitrose can be reached at 508-626-3964 or cbreitro@cnc.com)

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