

THE ISLAND

Board of Ed eliminates funding for proposed intermediate school

■ **Budget shortfall postpones construction of 947-seat school slated for New Springville**

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Last-minute negotiations failed to save a planned Staten Island intermediate school from becoming a budget shortfall casualty.

At a contentious meeting in Brooklyn, the seven-member Board of Education narrowly agreed to amend its construction plan, with members from the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens siding against the mayor's

two appointees and Staten Island's representative.

The majority approved a scheme that postpones a 947-seat intermediate school for New Springville as well as 10 new schools or additions around the city, while preserving 21 new buildings, most of them in Queens.

"Staten Island is getting hurt, as it is always getting hurt," said Jerry Cammarata, the borough's representative to the board.

Because of severe cost underestimates, the board is running a \$2.4 billion deficit, leaving only half the needed money for construction and repairs jobs through 2004. Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy drafted the construction plan amendment, using district utilization rates as a yardstick for need.

Cammarata argued that criteria fails to acknowledge Staten Is-

land's geography and building boom. "The Island is so big that the cost to the Board of Education to do transportation there is incredible," he said.

An underutilized school on one side of the Island may be miles apart from an overcrowded school in another neighborhood. "To make an argument that Staten Island is under capacity is a false argument," said Cammarata.

According to board figures, only 94 percent of District 31's space is utilized. The district takes in the borough's public elementary and intermediate schools. Whereas, Queens has school districts at 122- and 113-percent capacity rates, board records show.

The proposed IS 43 would have alleviated overcrowding at Markham Intermediate School in Graniteville, where students take classes in shifts because the building has a 119-percent utilization rate. It would have also siphoned away pupils from Laurie Inter-

mediate School in New Springville, operating at 112-percent capacity.

Robert Koffler, PTA president at Laurie, said she was saddened by the loss.

"There are classes in the auditorium," said Ms. Koffler in a telephone interview. "They deserve a classroom with a chalkboard — everything we had. These are such important years."

One of the solutions Levy has suggested is creating K-8 schools where elementary schools have extra space and middle schools have none. However, most of the schools that feed into Markham and Laurie are already well over capacity.

At yesterday's meeting, Levy said he shared some of Cammarata's thoughts, but had to address districts with the most extreme overcrowding.

"The plan that we have before us doesn't begin to meet the needs [of the entire system]," said Levy. "What we're doing today is taking our best shot at fairness."

After the meeting the chancellor repeatedly said he tried to keep politics out of the discussions. However, he conceded, many players including Borough President Guy V. Molinari, were consulted during the negotiations.

"We had to get four votes," admitted Levy. "Between the cup to the lips, boy, were there politics."

Two significant changes were made to the construction plan between yesterday and Wednesday, when it was first publicly presented to the board.

In the adopted plan, Manhattan will receive \$35 million more than initially thought to lease buildings as schools. On Wednesday that money had been pegged for the creation of a permanent home for the Frank Sinatra School for the Arts in Queens. Instead, Queens will fund the performing arts high school through its portion of the \$150 million designated by the City Council two years ago for school construction.

The Bronx also benefited from the revised plan, which gave it money to repair a landmark elementary school.

According to the president of the board, Ninfa Segarra, Staten Island didn't have to be the loser. She put forward a plan that would have shelved a Queens high school for a couple of years, while allowing construction on Staten Island to go forward.

"The offer was credible, unequivocally. If Terri [Thomson, the Queens member] had gone for it, I think we would have been 7-0," said Ms. Segarra. "The capital plan has always been a political exercise. The plan at the end was not based on need. It was based on getting the fourth vote."

After the meeting Borough President Guy V. Molinari said he was awake past 11 Thursday night and early yesterday morning, trying to negotiate to keep the intermediate school, which would have been the only new Staten Island school in the latest five-year capital construction plan, other than PS 58, a 985-seat school under construction in New Springville.

"They can sugar-coat this all they want, but the fact of the matter is, Staten Island got screwed," said Molinari.