

Budget crisis may delay a new school

■ Construction of New Springville intermediate could be held over for next 5-year capital plan

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As Board of Education members debate the fate of school building projects, local officials fear Staten Island will lose a new intermediate school pegged for New Springville.

A \$2.3 billion shortfall in the school construction budget is forcing the seven-member board to perform economic triage on projects in the five-year capital plan. Members are expected to take up the issue tomorrow.

IS 43 is a likely target since it is slated for a 2004 opening, the end of the spending plan. Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy has suggested delaying projects scheduled for that date and placing them in the next five-year

plan, an idea Borough President Guy V. Molinari called "unacceptable."

"IS 43 is badly needed and we'll continue to put our heads together to see what we can achieve in the bargaining process. I would not agree to including it in the next five-year plan, not knowing who will be board members or who will be chancellor," said Molinari.

The intermediate school is currently in the design phase and officials were hoping to start construction this summer. It is designed to siphon off overflow from Laurie Intermediate School in New Springville and Markham Intermediate School in Graniteville.

Both schools are severely overcrowded and construction of new homes in the area portends more growth. Already, Laurie is at 112-percent capacity with nearly 2,000 students. Markham is at 119-percent capacity and operates on split sessions, meaning one group of students takes classes in the morning and another group comes in during the afternoon.

"If we don't get that school, we'll

have major concerns," said Christy Cugini, superintendent for Staten Island elementary and intermediate schools. He said the Island middle-school population is expanding, with the current fifth-grade class larger than the outgoing eighth-grade class.

Also coping with a space crunch are Barnes Intermediate School in Great Kills and Paulo Intermediate School in Huguenot.

According to the latest census data, the local intermediate- and high school-age population grew by 28 percent — roughly 7,113 children — in the last 10 years. There are currently 32,203 children ages 10 to 14 living on Staten Island.

"We need to look at the entire city system in terms of needs. It's really wide open right now," said Jerry Cammarata, Staten Island's representative to the board. "Clearly, Staten Island has need and significant growth and credible evidence for us to provide relief with a new school."

Since 1995, five new public schools have either opened here or entered definitive planning stages, but most of those seats were created for children in the primary grades. There has been a 30-percent jump in the number of borough children aged 5 to 9 since 1990, bringing the elementary school crop to 32,967 — the largest ever for the borough. And as they grow up, more seats in intermediate and high schools will be needed.

IS 43 is supposed to be built next door to PS 58, which is already under construction on Marsh Avenue. Officials hope to complete the elementary school next December and open it to students in the fall of 2003.

"Staten Island has been consistently shortchanged in the past and we've been playing catch-up," said Molinari. "We don't want to find ourselves in the position where we are losing project after project."

Molinari, like many Island officials, acknowledges that other boroughs are struggling with overcrowded schools. In Queens, the School Construction Authority recently approved the construction of four schools.

The political battle for schools will be fierce, predicted Molinari.

"Yes, there are other boroughs with needs. But what are we supposed to do? Sit back and do nothing?" said Sal Ballarino, construction chairman of the Staten Island Community School Board. "I'm worried about Staten Island, and I'm not going to let other boroughs take our piece of the pie."

Levy, who requested board members rank projects, is trying to find creative solutions to a construction nightmare. One proposal, redrawing district boundaries, is likely to meet with opposition.

The chancellor also appointed a commission on the capital plan to develop ways of creating more seats with less money.

Meanwhile, movement on adding school seats with \$30 million earmarked by the City Council for each borough has been minimal. This summer, the three Island Council representatives agreed to relieve the most packed schools in their districts with building additions — Markham; PS 52, Dongan Hills, and PS 1, Tottenville.

The board is waiting for City Council Speaker Peter Vallone to sign off on the deal, said Councilman James Oddo (R-Mid-Island). Then the councilmen will outline their plans with the board's Division of School Facilities, he said.