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City Gives \$2M To Upgrade Simms School

Council Members Vote 4-0 To Pay For Large Chunk Of Renovation

By ROB LONGLEY
Daily News-Record

Renovation of the Lucy F. Simms School moved a step closer to fruition Tuesday with the Harrisonburg City Council's commitment of \$2 million to the project. The city's pledge not only guaran-

tees a huge chunk of the renovation's \$5.5 million cost, it also allows redevelopment officials to apply for federal grants and other funding to help restore the former school for black children.

"It's going to please a lot of folks to have a positive plan for the school's future," Mayor Joseph Fitzgerald said following the council's 4-0 vote. Councilman Hugh Lantz could not attend Tuesday's meeting.

"And I'm sure it's a relief for all the agencies that use the school that we're going to try to keep it a viable entity," the mayor added.

Addition Also Planned

The city plans to renovate the 27,000-square foot Simms into a "life-long learning center that celebrates diversity in our past, present and future," according to a report on the project.

The restored school will include office and program space for the Boys and Girls Club, which currently uses the school, education and job training facilities and life-skills learning space for the Association of Retarded Citizens.

The project also includes an 18,000-square foot addition, which

will house a teen center, weight room, food court and other facilities.

The project could break ground as early as this fall. Construction is expected to take about a year.

The Simms School was built in 1939. It was named after Lucy F. Simms, a former slave who became a beloved teacher and principal at Harrisonburg's Effinger School, the city's first for black children. Simms died in 1934.

The Simms School served the black community until it closed in

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Funding For Simms School Comes From A Variety Of Sources

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1965 following racial integration.

In addition to the city's pledge, funding for the project includes a \$1.5 million capital campaign from the Boys and Girls Club, \$500,000 from ARC, a \$700,000 community development block grant and \$800,000 in historical tax credits.

School Presents Budget

In other business Tuesday night, Harrisonburg school officials present-

ed their proposed 2003-04 budget to council. The \$39.2 million spending plan calls for a 9.19 percent increase over this year's budget.

Much of that growth, however, comes from a \$1.2 million federal technology grant, for which the city's school system is acting as fiscal agent for a 20-district consortium. The grant counts as part of the school board's budget, but no city funds will have to be spent because of it.

The increase without the grant, therefore, is really 5.7 percent, Schools

Superintendent Donald Ford said.

The school board has had to grapple with significant increases in several departments, Ford noted.

The cost for textbooks alone, he said, will jump \$53,000, while bus transportation will increase almost \$78,000. Maintenance and operations costs will go up \$77,000 and health insurance will rise a whopping \$437,000.

The city's contribution to the school budget would stand at \$20.3 million, a 6.3 percent increase, if council accepts the proposed spending plan as is.

Council members will delve into its details after they review the city's spending plan, due out next month.

Ford pleaded with council to leave the budget intact.

"It really is necessary to request funds that increase year after year," he said. "It's very, very difficult to maintain the quality programs and services that the children deserve and the community demands."

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