

Cost of new roof won't be a drop in the hat

District hopes voters approve \$1.19M appropriation for repairs

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(STAFF PHOTO: TIM MCCARTHY)

Frank Vanalesti, Ocean Gate Elementary School superintendent, discusses the need for a new roof at the school.

BEHIND THE NEWS

In a letter dated Aug. 1, the state Department of Education told Ocean Gate school officials it agreed to pay for 56.3041 percent of the project, or \$668,283.

Ocean Gate taxpayers would be responsible for \$518,633. "It's an unprecedented amount for our district and many other districts," Superintendent Frank Vanalesti said. "Other than an Abbott district, I'm not sure how many districts would get reimbursement like that."

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BY JOE ZEDALIS

TOMS RIVER BUREAU

OCEAN GATE — The torrential downpours of Sept. 15, which flooded roads and filled retention basins throughout Ocean County, confirmed what officials at the borough elementary school have suspected for some time.

"We need a new roof," Superintendent Frank Vanalesti said. "The water found its way into every crack. It leaks like a sieve."

On Dec. 12, voters will be asked to approve the appropriation of \$1,186,916, with the majority of the money going toward repairing the roof. The state Department of Education has agreed to pay for slightly more than 56 percent of the cost, or \$668,283.

"The public needs to know we have a grant that may not be here tomorrow," said Councilwoman Monica Brink, the Borough Council liaison to the Board of Education. "If we don't take advantage of this opportunity, we could wind up paying for the whole thing ourselves . . . and that will be a big chunk of change for us."

Lynn Smith of East Lakewood Drive has daughters in second grade and preschool kindergarten.

"To me, this is a no-brainer," Smith said. "The roof needs to be done. Whether we take advantage of this great opportunity or whether the community pays for 100 percent of the project is up to the voters. It's their call.

"We're not asking for anything extravagant. It's all about the safety of the children."

The heavy rains, however, showed the urgency of the situation — one drip at a time.

Vanalesti said trash cans, used as catch basins, were in hallways and classrooms. A 10-foot area of ceiling tiles in the media center collapsed and water poured onto tables and carpets.

"Luckily, none of the technology in the media center was damaged," Vanalesti said. "Water leaked into the gymnasium, we had to close down one classroom and move students from the one-room schoolhouse into the main building."

Vanalesti said that, had the leaking not happened on a Friday, the school might well have been closed a day for cleanups and repairs.

"There was a quite a bit of cleanup that was done over the weekend," he said.

Fearful of slips and slides and water reaching electrical fixtures, administrators kept students in classrooms. Vanalesti, secretaries and cafeteria workers delivered lunches to students.

"Safety was our first concern," Vanalesti said.

But the new roof is a close second on the concerns list.

"Like it or not, we need to maintain the school," Brink said.

Vanalesti said the school has a flat roof, which traditionally has a life of about 15 years. Although adding frames that would turn the roof from flat to slanted would be preferable, that would not be feasible or cost-effective in Ocean Gate.

"We have equipment on the roof, like air conditioning units," Vanalesti said. "Moving those units would be an extreme expense. We owe our children a clean, dry, healthy environment in which to learn."

Vanalesti said the money would also pay for a bathroom, which is required in a preschool classroom, and a new boiler.

"There's never a good time to ask the residents for more money," Brink said. "We have done repair projects on the roof, but we were putting a Band-Aid on something that needed major surgery."

Vanalesti said a facilities committee will meet with bond counsel Oct. 11 to determine financing rates. The district can then accurately calculate the impact on taxpayers.

Vanalesti said the Ocean Gate Elementary School dates back to 1914, when it was a one-room schoolhouse. There was an expansion project in 1968, and in 1994 a gymnasium was added.

"The people of Ocean Gate have always valued the history of our school and a quality education," Vanalesti said.

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