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# Governor's signature the final hurdle for Stew-Stras funding

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STRASBURG — After five years of disappointment, the Stewardson-Strasburg school district finds itself tantalizingly close to a long-awaited grant for the renovation and expansion of its aging school building.

The General Assembly last week passed a supplemental bill that includes \$150 million for 24 Illinois school districts — Stew-Stras among them — that were promised construction grants in 2002.

The bill, which also calls for a controversial legislative salary increase, is on its way to Gov. Rod Blagojevich. But until it actually arrives, officials with the Governor's Office of Management and Budget said they do not know which line-items in the supplemental package are likely to be vetoed.

So Stew-Stras officials once again are keeping their jubilation in check.

"It's not done until it's done," said Superintendent Ruth Schneider. "We still don't have the governor's signature. I'm not going to start celebrating until the governor's signed on the dotted line and I've received notification from the (state) that we have the money."

Even so, this is as near as her school district has ever gotten to the \$2-million grant promised but never allocated by the state as part of the now-dormant School Construction Program.

Voters in the Stew-Stras school district passed a referendum in 2002 authorizing the the sale of about \$1.3 million in bonds for the district's share of the \$3.3-million project. With this referendum set to expire in March, the school board in February decided to borrow their portion despite not yet having the matching state funds in hand.

State Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon, attributed the inclusion of the school construction funding in the recent supplemental bill to the tenacity of state

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Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, who also serves as superintendent of the Hutsonville school district.

"Roger really was a bully over there in the House to get the school money in there," said Righter.

Ironically, both Eddy and Righter voted against the final draft of the supplemental bill because it contained a 9.6-percent pay raise for lawmakers along with the school funding.

"At the end of the day, it's a bad way to do business," Eddy said of the \$1.5-million salary hike.

But he and Righter noted the bill was headed for passage regardless of how either of them voted. Had theirs been the deciding ballots, they likely would have acted differently, they said.

"If mine had been the deciding vote, I would have voted in favor of the kids, no question, but I would have had to swallow the bitter taste of that pay raise being in there," Eddy said.

Righter said, "It would have been much more difficult for me if my vote would have made the difference. I probably would have supported (the bill) because of the school issue, but then I would have had to come home and explain to my constituents why I voted" for a salary increase.

Schneider said she understands the awkward position in which Eddy and Righter were placed, and she still considers them champions of school construction funding.

"The way that they voted does not change my opinion of them as men at all," she said. "They have been very supportive through this whole project. Both Dale and Roger have worked very hard to get us our funding.

"There is an element of politics that is a game, and they have to do what they have to do within that game. But the bottom line is, we got our money."

Maybe. According to Justin DeJong, spokesman for the Governor's Office of Budget and Management, Blagojevich could still veto line-items in the supplemental bill, which had not yet made its way over from the General Assembly as of Wednesday.

DeJong said, "We'll be looking more closely at the bill when it reaches the governor's desk."

He noted Blagojevich has "pushed" for capital spending in each of his past budget proposals.

If the school construction funding in the new bill avoids the governor's red pen, another obstacle still looms for the Stew-Stras district: The supplemental package allows for the total grant amount promised five years ago, but the bill does not encompass increases in construction costs over the last half-decade, according to Eddy.

"Of course it's a big concern," Schneider said. "We'll have to go back and look at the project, and see what we can do within the guidelines of the grant to complete our project.

"But we can't do the project as proposed five years ago, based on costs."

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