

Legislators update Holyoke City Council on **middle school funding, home rule petitions**

Published: Feb. 03, 2022, By **Dennis Hohenberger** | [Story source: MassLive.com](#)

HOLYOKE — State legislators briefed city councilors on home rule petitions before the Legislature and reimbursement for a proposed middle school.

Councilor Tessa Murphy-Romboletti, chair of the council's Development and Governmental Relations Committee, welcomed state Rep. Patricia Duffy, D-Holyoke, and state Sen. John Velis, D-Westfield, on Wednesday. In October, Ward 3 Councilor David Bartley filed an order requesting the legislators provide updates.

Duffy began the discussion with Home Rule Petitions, special acts approved by the Massachusetts Legislature germane to Holyoke. Presently, Duffy submitted four Home Rule Petitions in the House.

The City Council filed two petitions. The first would strike a residency requirement for the City Solicitor and Department of Public Works superintendent. Duffy and Patricia Devine, a DPW commissioner, testified before a House committee.

“The language is straightforward, but we want to convey that urgency,” Duffy said. “I know the departments are understaffed right now, and we want to widen the pool of applicants.” Acting heads helm the DPW and the city's Law Department.

Duffy expects the act will pass in the House and move to the Senate in the coming weeks.

Late last year, the council filed an act relevant to illegal dirt bikes and off-road vehicles. The petition calls for local authorities to seize the bikes that prowl city streets. Springfield filed a similar Home Rule Petition with the Judiciary Committee.

The House counsel informed Duffy the act contains powers the City of Holyoke already possesses.

The third petition relates to recalling elected officials, a privilege not granted under the City Charter. If passed, a recall effort would affect elected officials whose term is more than two years.

In September, the Joint Committee on Election Laws held a hearing on the petition. In a side note, Duffy said the committee took up legislation called The Votes Act that expands voting methods, making early voting and mail-in ballots a permanent fixture.

The Senate's version favors same-day voter registration not included in the House draft. Duffy supported same-day registration, but the amendment did not gain traction. She hoped the House and Senate would reach a compromise.

Velis said, “We're on the same team here. We all want what's best for Holyoke and beyond.”

His district covers 11 cities and towns, a hodge-podge of Gateway Cities to hill towns like Granville and Tolland.

The senator said he would submit the petitions once the House passes them. He remarked his working relationship with Duffy was seamless. Velis added that local officials' support was "paramount" in passing The Votes Act.

Velis did not want the final legislation to prove burdensome or complex for town and city clerks in the Commonwealth.

Ward 2 Councilor Will Puello asked Duffy and Velis about reimbursement rates tied to the proposed middle school project. The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) sets reimbursements rates for renovation and construction projects.

Duffy said the reimbursement rates are capped and should be reexamined. The MSBA's top reimbursement rate stands at 80%. However, the authority approved a rate of 59-60% when the two middle school proposal was floated in Holyoke.

Velis filed a bill in January that targets three school districts in state receivership, one being Holyoke. The bill would aid communities under receivership and "go above and beyond" the MSBA's reimbursement rate.

Velis said senior Senate leaders appear committed to passing a bill in the current term, including similar legislation filed by State Sen. Jo Comerford.

On Tuesday, Velis spoke with MSBA officials about Holyoke's reimbursement rate and proposed legislation. The City Council must approve a \$475,000 bond to conduct a middle school feasibility study, an MSBA requirement.

Councilor At-large Joseph M. McGiverin said, "There are very few communities in the Commonwealth that can afford new school construction. With construction rates going crazy, we are desperate for help the Commonwealth can provide so we can build new school buildings."

McGiverin said a new middle school would let the district consolidate several elementary schools and take inefficient buildings offline. The proposed school would serve 550 students or half the citywide middle school population.

He cited the city's low per capita income and poverty rates, some of the worst in Massachusetts. "We're working on breaking the poverty cycle. The way you break the poverty cycle is, one, education, two, job opportunities," he said.

McGiverin said the city could not support the MSBA's current reimbursement formula, which he tabbed as unfair to poorer communities.