

# Audit: Wasatch High \$15M in red

**Cost overruns** » The school would be the most expensive per square foot in Utah.

By CHRISTOPHER SMART

Cash-strapped Wasatch School District is facing cost overruns of more than \$15 million on its new high school under construction, according to a state audit.

Wasatch school officials dispute the analysis.

The November Legislative Auditor General's report states that it will be the most expensive high school built in Utah over the past two years, based on square-foot construction costs.

The report also cites a flawed selection process that chose the architect.

Construction was originally budgeted at \$46.2 million and now is anticipated to cost \$61.7 million, the audit states. Land acquisition is an additional \$4.2 million, bringing the total to just under \$66 million.

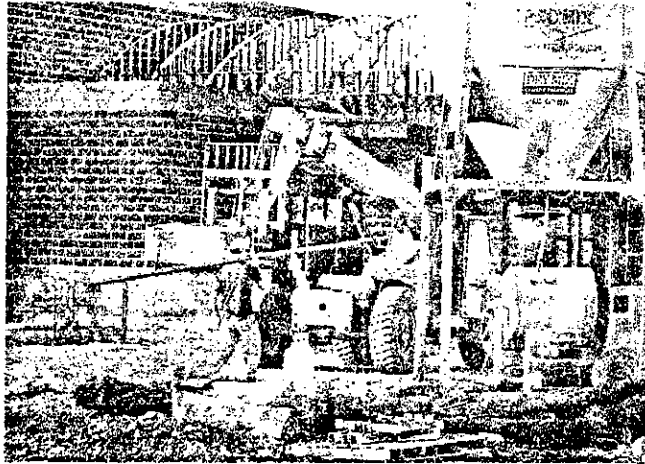
Wasatch Superintendent Terry Shoemaker this week disputed the cost-overrun total.

He agreed the construction cost of the school, slated to open in fall 2009, is about \$61.7 million. But he said the original construction cost was set at \$59.5 million and is only \$2.2 million over budget.

The disagreement apparently surrounds an original estimate of \$46.2 million for the construction.

School Board member Alan Bluth said that estimate was made several years ago, when the project was conceived. Since then, he said, construction costs have soared.

In November 2006, Wasatch voters approved a \$59.5 million bond for the high school — and that figure included land acquisition.



SCOTT SOMMERDORF

Crews at work on Wasatch High School. Construction was budgeted at \$46.2 million and is anticipated to cost \$61.7 million.

equipment and related improvements, according to the audit.

The school district's selection committee awarded the design contract to Orem-based Sandstrom Associates Architecture, although the firm had much less experience in designing high schools than other bidders, the audit states.

"Our concern is that a consistent evaluation process was not followed for scoring firm experience," the audit states.

Unlike other firms bidding for the project, Sandstrom was allowed to interview school officials and teachers to make a "needs assessment" before bidding.

Bluth said the facility will prove to be a sound investment for the community for decades to come.

Noting Wasatch County's growth, he said: "We wanted to make sure we built a school that was good enough for 60 years."

At \$193 per square foot, the new Wasatch High School is the most expensive of seven high schools built in Utah in the past two years. The average for seven high schools being built during the same period is \$154.

Wasatch County resident Robert Wren said school

## The audit report says:

- » The 320,000-square-foot project will cost \$193 per square foot.
- » The average for seven new Utah high schools is \$154 per square foot.
- » The existing Wasatch High School will be sold to help make up costs.

largest, most opulent school in the state, and they've gone out and done it."

District officials continue to be less than forthcoming on the cost of the high school, said resident Tracy Taylor.

"They need to come to the people and explain what the heck is going on," she said.

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