

# POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

## Barth and Rupert schools at risk?

The Pottstown School District's five elementary schools have aging mechanical systems that desperately need to be replaced.

According to the district's architects, for \$13 million the district could install geothermal heating and cooling systems in all five elementary schools and perform other upgrades: new ceilings, high-energy light fixtures, floor tiles, new technology wiring, electrical service upgrades, and replacement windows at the Rupert and Edgewood elementary schools.

This would substantially lower the schools' energy consumption and extend their useful life for decades to come.

The proposal would be less than half the cost of any other plan considered thus far.

This Thursday night, the Pottstown School Board will vote on whether to apply for federal stimulus bond money through the state Department of Education to fund the upgrades. The zero-to-low-interest bond money could amount to as much as a 37 percent subsidy over 15 years. The deadline to apply is April 1.

By applying, the district is not obligated to take the money if it is later approved. But the district doesn't have the luxury of waiting years to make a decision.

Last week, the district's architect and an engineering firm both suggested the existing mechanical systems in all five schools have already far exceeded their normal life expectancy.

The district also has 23 modulars surrounding its elementary schools which everyone agrees should be eliminated as soon as possible.

One way would be to create more space in the elementary schools by moving the fifth grade to the middle school, which has capacity for more students.

Another way would be simply to make better use of the space that already exists in the elementary schools.

In 1995, when our elementary schools enrolled 340 more students than they do today, we had no modulars. As recently as two years ago, we had just 13 modulars. We added 10 more in 2008 in anticipation they would be needed for "swing space" if we closed schools for renovations.

If a school needs to be enlarged, the logical candidate would be Lincoln, because it has the largest number of students within walking distance.

Barth, Edgewood and Rupert are good candidates to stay the size they are now. A decision on Franklin could be put off until last, because it has the newest boilers.

School Board President Rick Huss has sensibly suggested forming a task force to explore options.

Unfortunately, some former board members are still loudly pushing to consolidate our five schools to three.

Certainly, consolidation would make sense if we were losing students. But we are not losing elementary school-aged students. We are gaining them.

To consolidate our elementary schools, we would have to greatly enlarge two or three schools, which would cost at least twice as much as the current plan.

In addition, we would likely lose the Barth and Rupert elementary schools, which have been neighborhood anchors for more than 50 years. Time and again, studies have shown that small neighborhood schools provide a superior learning environment, especially for students from low-income families.

That's why Pottstown voters have twice overwhelmingly elected candidates — in 2007 and 2009 — who have pledged to keep all five neighborhood schools.

To pay for renovations, the district will either have to raise taxes or cut costs. Although some claim that cutting costs would require eliminating music, art, and athletics, this is simply a scare tactic.

For example, the district could save \$2 million to \$3 million annually by downsizing to the same number of employees it had 10 years ago, when we had 300 more students and 70 fewer staff than we have today. (We also had all the music, art, and athletic programs we have today.)

All across Pennsylvania, districts have had to make tough decisions. We must, too.

*This column expresses the personal views of Tom Hylton and does not represent the views of any public or private organization with which he is affiliated.*



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