

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

School task force: Costs matter

When a family considers whether to buy or renovate a home, or a business thinks about buying or renovating a building, the first question is, "What can we afford?"

But members of a task force looking at the use of Pottstown School District facilities — its elementary schools, middle and high schools, and administrative buildings — are not addressing that question.

Task force procedure

Instead, the task force was advised last week, it should concentrate on creating a quality educational environment. Once the task force has narrowed down options to be considered, district architects will figure out how much they will cost.

And no one except task force members will be allowed to present any thoughts or suggestions at its meetings until the task force members have initially identified their own preferred options.

This procedure seems rather constrained. The public will have a chance to speak out only after the task force chooses its options.

Fiscal challenges

One thing is for sure. Pottstown has major fiscal challenges. We have the seventh highest taxes of 500 school districts in Pennsylvania.

Our state funding next year will be \$3.1 million less than this year.

Because the state pension system for retired public school employees is underfunded, the district's annual contribution to the system will skyrocket over the next few years, from about \$2 million this year to nearly \$6 million five years from now, unless we significantly reduce our payroll.

Meanwhile, the district is paying about \$2.9 million annually in debt service for renovations and additions to the high school and middle school completed about 10 years ago. These annual payments will continue for more than 15 years.

"Wants" versus "needs"

Task force members have visited all the district's buildings and heard presentations from building principals and administrators about deficiencies: We need more space at the elementary school level. We need all the classrooms to be the same size. We need to put the offices at the front doors. We need more space for manipulatives, more space for "push in" rather than "pull out." But these are all "wants," not "needs." Our greatest need is to create a sustainable educational system that we can afford.

Code confusion

One of the most unnecessary goals is "bringing our schools up to code." Our schools *are* up to code. The confusion comes from Pennsylvania's two codes: the International Building Code, for new buildings; and the International Existing Building Code, for existing buildings. The code for new buildings changes every three years. When it does, every existing building, even one recently finished, is no longer compliant in some way with the latest version of the code. That doesn't mean it isn't safe and functional. So we can waste millions of dollars trying to make an existing school meet the most recent version of the code, or we can make necessary improvements to our schools in compliance with the International Existing Building Code and spend our money on something more productive.

Visiting private schools

Earlier this month, I reported on my visits to several private schools in the area, including Coventry Christian School and West-Mont Christian Academy. These schools provide an excellent k-12 education to students in buildings that were once used as elementary schools by public school districts. Then they were closed as "inadequate" for a modern instructional program and sold.

I believe task force members should visit these schools also, to help them distinguish between "wants" and "needs."

Space issues

It's a fact: our high school and middle school have a great deal of excess capacity. The high school can accommodate about 1,300 students, but it only enrolls about 800. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the high school enrolled more than 1,000 students annually, and that was *before* the high school was enlarged 25 percent in 2001.

Likewise, the middle school, which was enlarged about 75 percent in 2000, can accommodate 960 students but only enrolls about 600.

Moreover, our secondary enrollment is projected to decline in the next few years while our elementary enrollment increases.

Our administrative offices are also much larger than they need to be.

So the main issue for the task force is not space, but space management. We must use what we have more efficiently.

Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not the board's.



Commentary by
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