

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

“Green” schools: No larger than necessary

Today is Earth Day, a day established to foster appreciation for the environment and encourage efforts to protect it.

One of the best and most cost-effective ways we can protect the environment is to recycle our older buildings and make them energy efficient. In fact, the state Department of Environmental Protection calls recycling older buildings “the No. 1 Principle of ‘green’ building design.”

School buildings are especially important, because they represent the largest construction sector in America.

The Pottstown School Board has been discussing for more than a decade renovating or replacing some or all of its five elementary schools.

Pottstown’s two-story brick schools such as Lincoln, Franklin, and Rupert make excellent candidates for renovation as “green” schools. Their solid masonry walls and foundations can last indefinitely with good maintenance.

Their compact, multi-story layout is more efficient to heat and cool than the sprawling one-story buildings that became fashionable in the 1950s and 1960s.

Their high ceilings provide plenty of

space for new wiring, ductwork, and piping. Their large window openings can capture plenty of natural daylight, while high-performance glazing can dramatically increase insulation values.

But the most inexpensive way to create energy-efficient schools is to avoid excess space.

Unfortunately, every building plan proposed by our administrators involves adding more space to our elementary schools, even though enrollments have remained relatively stable for two decades.

For example, all of Pottstown’s elementary schools currently have multi-purpose rooms which are used as auditoriums, gyms, and cafeterias. But our administrators call

for adding separate cafeterias to our schools, along with large group instruction rooms and other spaces that are nice but really not necessary.

Pottstown can’t afford excess space, either financially or environmentally. We should remember that when renovating our elementary schools.

Thomas Hylton, a 36-year resident of Pottstown, is Web site editor of Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Summary

- **The “greenest” schools are existing buildings that have been recycled. The bricks, steel, concrete and other materials in existing schools represent “embodied energy” that is wasted if they are demolished and replaced.**
- **Compact, two-story pre-war buildings are easier to retrofit as energy-efficient schools than the sprawling one-story schools built in the 1950s and 1960s.**
- **The most energy efficient school is one that is no larger than necessary. Even with state-of-the-art technology, the more space you build, the more energy you need to heat and cool it.**



In 2000, the Pottstown Middle School was enlarged far more than necessary, including a new three-story atrium/stair tower, a second auditorium, and a large group instruction room with a cathedral ceiling. A key principle of “green” building design is to avoid excess space. We should remember that with proposed elementary school building projects.