

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Setting priorities in tough times

Earlier this month, the state Department of Education updated its annual comparison of spending and taxation by Pennsylvania's 500 school districts.

Third highest taxes

Pottstown now has the third highest tax effort in the state — more than 99 percent of the districts in the Commonwealth.

Only the Brentwood and Wilkesburg school districts, in Allegheny County, have higher taxes than we do.

Meanwhile, the total assessed value of Pottstown's real estate is \$803.7 million, about \$13 million below where it was two decades ago, when the county last reassessed.

Now, because of increased salary, health and pension costs, Pottstown's tentative budget will increase by \$1.9 million in the upcoming school year.

Budget deficit

If the General Assembly passes Gov. Wolf's proposed budget — a big "if" — Pottstown's estimated shortfall could be whittled down to \$1 million because of increased state aid.

That's still a substantial deficit, and with our declining tax base, raising taxes is simply not an option.

So we have to economize — not just for the 2017-2018 school year, but long-term.

First test

Our first test will come tonight, when the school board will discuss a proposal to improve the athletic fields

along Franklin Street north of Pottstown Middle School.

Nine years ago, the school district administration unveiled a premium plan by landscape architect Stephen Parks for \$4 million worth of upgrades to the athletic fields at the high school -middle school complex.

Artificial turf

Most of the fields are so heavily used, Parks said, that he recommended artificial turf on one of the fields along Franklin Street in addition to the auxiliary field used for band practice next to the high school cafeteria.

Otherwise, Parks said, money is being spent to let the fields "limp along, while you are throwing maintenance at it for not much return."

The costly artificial turf proposal never gained any traction. Now the board is being asked to renovate 7.5 acres of fields along Franklin Street for \$277,000, including digging a well and installing an irrigation system.

Long-range planning needed

Considering the major financial problems facing the district — including the upcoming deficit of \$1 million or more — perhaps we should pause in our discretionary spending. More than ever, we need a long-range plan to keep our district financially sustainable in the coming years. We can't just keep approving projects sporadically as they come before us.

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



Commentary by
Tom Hylton



FRANKLIN STREET FIELDS PROJECT — The Pottstown School Board will vote Monday on a \$277,000 proposal to improve athletic fields covering 7.5 acres along North Franklin Street north of the Middle School. The proposal includes digging a well and providing an irrigation system.