Hill School needs to step up

Earlier this month, Pottstown Borough Manager Mark Flanders told Council that without cuts in services, borough real estate taxes will need to increase 23 percent next January to cover a projected $2.4 million budget shortfall.

Hundreds of successful property assessment challenges have lowered the borough’s tax base below its value of 20 years ago.

Even worse, Pottstown’s biggest taxpayer, the Pottstown Memorial Medical Center, will be sold to the non-profit Reading Health Systems and become tax-exempt.

But the medical center is not Pottstown’s most valuable property. With an assessed valuation of nearly $43 million, The Hill School is worth almost twice as much as the hospital.

The school avoids an annual $2.2 million real estate tax bill because of the tax-exempt status of its campus.

Ironically, the school serves a mostly affluent population, while the lion’s share of Pottstown tax dollars support the Pottstown School District, which serves a student population that is 67 percent low income and minority.

The Hill School trustees recognize Pottstown’s physical and financial decline. In fact, a school white paper identified Pottstown as its No. 1 problem recruiting students and faculty.

Two years ago, the school identified an area lining the perimeter of the campus comprising about 600 mostly residential parcels, plus Edgewood Cemetery, it calls Hobart’s Run.

The school hired a community organizer to help improve the neighborhood’s appearance and livability.

The Hobart’s Run initiative has been a public relations bonanza for the school, garnering a raft of positive headlines.

The school has unofficially taken over maintenance of Edgewood Cemetery. It held a real estate forum last spring touting Pottstown. But it has yet to make any substantive improvements to the neighborhood or to Pottstown. It can — and must — do more.

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

HILL SCHOOL FAST FACTS:
100+ acre campus (tax exempt)
520 students, co-ed
28 states
23 foreign countries
Day tuition: $39,170
Boarding tuition: $56,775
Endowment: $162 million