

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Building to excess (4 of 4)

Twenty years ago, the Pottstown School District began an unprecedented spending spree that has made our borough one of the most highly taxed communities in Pennsylvania.

According to calculations by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Pottstown's local tax effort now ranks 6th of the state's 500 districts.

In 1999, the district embarked on lavish additions and renovations to the high school and middle school at a cost of almost \$40 million. Both schools were substantially enlarged even though the student population did not increase.

The elementary schools were next. In 2006, school administrators proposed building a \$60 million centralized elementary school campus to be built in Pottstown's downtown Washington Street corridor.

The plan called for acquiring 126 buildings in Pottstown's lowest income neighborhood and relocating residents and businesses at public expense.

The buildings would then be demolished to make way for three new buildings housing 1,700 elementary school students, plus playgrounds and parking lots, all on an 11-acre campus.

The Montgomery County Redevelopment Authority estimated it would cost more than \$20 million just to acquire properties and clear the land.

At the same time, the district planned to close and tear down Pottstown's five neighborhood elementary schools and sell the land to a developer for townhouses.

Even though zoning forbade it, the school district "assumed" a developer could squeeze 340 new townhouses on the tracts of the five elementary schools. And the price of the townhouses? The school district forecast they would sell for \$262,000 each.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

This pipe dream ended with the election of a "neighborhood schools team" in 2007 on a promise to renovate, but not enlarge, Pottstown's five existing elementary schools.

However, school district administrators (no longer here) continued to push for consolidated schools.

After much tumult, and many twists and turns, the

school board finally committed itself to renovating four elementary schools. Franklin, Lincoln and Rupert would be enlarged. Edgewood would be closed.

I was one of a minority of board members who unsuccessfully sought to keep all five elementary schools — including Edgewood— but forgo building any additions to the schools.

But superfluous additions to three of the elementary schools were built, pushing the final elementary school construction bill above \$30 million.

The school district already faces an estimated shortfall of \$1.6 million in the upcoming school year. The borough is forecasting annual million-dollar shortfalls of its own.

We simply cannot afford to add \$750,000 to our annual school district budget to reopen Edgewood and move the fifth grade there.

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



The Rupert Elementary School was right-sized for its neighborhood for nearly 90 years. But the school district built a major addition in 2014, and its attendance area was enlarged to include pupils in the middle of Pottstown.