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OPINION

Why LM needs new high schools

READER RESPONSE

David Shulick

I have previously written about this topic, and I have spoken with several friends, neighbors and clients who live in Lower Merion Township. After my paralegal visited Lower Merion to secure some information related to my January 2007 letter to the Lower Merion School District, Doug Young of LMSD asked me if I would like a personal tour of both high schools (Lower Merion and Harriton) to fully understand why they need to be torn down and rebuilt. Since many residents just complain about higher taxes, but in reality, leave it to others to secure the details, I took Mr. Young up on his offer, took two hours out of my schedule, and personally toured both high schools.

By way of background, the major issue that I questioned the district about was that they did not properly evaluate the cost of renovating instead of building new.

First, I was wrong to the extent that I inferred that there would even be an advantage to renovate instead of building new schools. As the president of Delaware Valley High School - Bustleton, the region's leading alternative school that deals with high school youth, I was dismayed by the high school facilities in this First Class town-

ship. They are, frankly, a disgrace, for multiple reasons: They are not suitable for providing a high school education. They are, instead, ill-conceived designs and additions from years past that have long outlived their useful life.

Second, putting cost aside for the moment, even if these buildings were refurbished from top to bottom, major educational problems would still remain, as follows:

LOWER MERION

1. I was shocked to see the "hodge-podge" of structures that constitute a "high school" in this township. The students are forced to traverse over four different buildings, all joined in one narrow nexus. As you can imagine, this creates horrific student management problems with long delays between classes.

2. The school is so overcrowded, the library is far too small, there is absolutely no parking for staff or students, and the teachers have no area to prepare their lessons. Again, if these were the only problems, they could be solved pragmatically but given item 1, they merely add insult to injury.

3. Implementing technology in the classrooms would be a virtual impossibility given their layout. Again, this could also be solved independently, but given the major issue of disconnected, aging structures, overwhelming staffing costs as a result, this too adds insult to injury;

4. Significantly, there is no room for special education services, counseling services, all which are becoming more important each and every year.

HARRITON

1. Harriton High School is a total abomination. It is amazing that one who has never been on the property or inside the structures has a totally different view of this school from driving down Harriton Road. This school would have been a wonderful design in California, but forcing students to travel outside between their classes in Pennsylvania weather is not only stupid, but a disaster. Security is non-existent. It is impossible to create a secure environment with the current design - five or more separate buildings over a large campus with canopy exterior walkways that are collapsing due to surface water and underground decay.

2. The current buildings are so poorly designed that there is constant water intrusion and decay.

3. There is no ability to create a single school climate with the hazardous design and layout.

4. Significantly, there is no room for special education services, counseling services, all which are becoming more important each year, not to mention the facility is not friendly to anyone with a physical disability.

In conclusion, high schools need to provide socialization and critical educational services to our

children. They need to be safe, secure, clean and orderly. There is no question that the highest operational cost of any school or district is its staff. These two schools, by design or lack thereof, require so much more staff than would be necessary if we had efficient, clean buildings. We are wasting hundreds of thousands of dollars on additional labor expense and emergency repairs to these structures.

Let any critic of this project visit these schools personally. There is no question that new schools are critically needed. Students in West Philadelphia have better facilities (the new Microsoft High School) than students in this district. Children are our future. We must provide an environment that will provide a good high school experience, for socialization and education of our children.

Finally, while I am still in favor of building one new high school instead of two, there is no question that the present structures need replacement for educational reasons. Perhaps the focus should be on the township, which needs to work with the district collaboratively to provide the variances that would permit consolidation of the schools that would save tens, if not hundreds of millions of future tax dollars for Lower Merion residents.

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