

MINNECHAUG REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

Status of Application:

Prior to the school vacation week a small representative committee from the District met with Katherine Craven, Executive Director of the Massachusetts School Building Authority, and Matt Donovan, MSBA Government and Community Relations Coordinator. Present were John Lovejoy, Scott Chapman, Brian Garbecki, Marty O'Shea, Ed Cenedella and me. Chuck Adams from Pinnacle One, our proposed project management firm attended as an interested and invited party. The meeting was very informative and beneficial from our viewpoint. We had specific goals developed for the meeting and feel that we were successful in addressing these.

A number of topics were discussed that are worth reviewing. Specifically we were concerned that actions we have taken to date might have to be redone to conform to the new regulations. Those actions were: naming a building committee, development of a feasibility study, and recommendations of both a project manager and an architectural firm. With some possible minor modifications, it appears that our pragmatic approach to the project has brought us in line with the new requirements. We were smart to slow the process down and proceed with caution as the MSBA works through the initial implementation of the new application process, which is significantly different from previous procedures.

Due to our approach, the MSBA views us as a district that has "done its homework" and has not rushed or attempted to expedite or circumvent the new process. We are viewed as a partner, not as an adversary. This was certainly good news. We also learned that our feasibility study has been viewed as a sound one and our statement of interest application appears to meet their expectations. Finally, Ms. Craven informed us that Minnechaug has been selected from the initial applicants to be reviewed by the engineering firm hired to validate all statements of interest. We hope that this visit will occur by the end of the month, but hopefully no later than mid-February. We look forward to that visit with great anticipation. Once this review occurs, we will know more about two important issues: 1) whether our application has met the MSBA criteria, and 2) what direction the MSBA believes is the best for Minnechaug: replacement or renovation?

Please remember that this new process is very different from past years. The State Legislature feels very strongly that they will only invest in projects that represent a sound fiscal response for both long and short term solutions. With a facility like ours, the State will not want to invest in a “quick fix”. Instead, they want solutions that will have 40-to-50 year life spans. These solutions must also be the most cost effective. While the Legislature specifically listed renovation as a favored approach, the MSBA is open to finding the best solution for the problems that confront a particular building or community. In short, they are searching for solutions that provide the best investment with the greatest return.

Please remember, too, that this new process will drive the eventual outcome of any approved project. By that I mean, the MSBA will tell us what they will support. Communities that wish to access the State funding will do so without the opportunity to select options. This is drastically different from how school construction was supported in the past. When a solution is approved by the State, it is that solution and that solution only which will be brought to the taxpayers for votes at town meetings and debt exclusions. In our case, voters will choose either yes or no on the course of action approved by the MSBA. There will be no choice or option as to renovation, replacement or any other proposed plans. This is radically different from our past experiences.

Comparing Costs: Once again we return to the debate!

Since discussion of possible solutions began nearly three years ago, the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham have questioned many decisions and actions taken by the School Committee, Facility/Building Committees and me. Although some of us may not have agreed with the rationale that they presented, each time a question or concern was raised, we invested time and researched the information we used in our decision-making process. If the question was legitimate, we gave it due consideration and time to make sure we had not overlooked facts or information that was critical to making the best decision possible. These constant “gut checks” have been very helpful to me personally and in fact have helped to solidify my belief that a replacement is the best solution with a major renovation project as the next best option. There clearly is no quick fix or adequate short term solution. The problems are too interrelated and integrated to treat separately. Therefore, anything that “piece meals” the solution over time will be too costly, too disruptive, and clearly not feasible. I cannot find

any opinion from someone in the field who believes that addressing the problems separately will work. Let me quote from our most recent report provided by Fontaine Bros. Inc.,

“However, the school while it still has some durable functioning parts, has, as a whole, outlived its functional life. To continue to add/remove and selectively upgrade this facility is no longer prudent spending.”

I am reminded of a Johnny Cash song (“The one on the right is the one on the left”) where he builds a new car by taking parts from an automotive assembly plant over the course of several years. In the end he has his car, but the car is a conglomeration of parts that don’t match and the car is a sight to behold! I am not sure we want to fix Minnechaug that way.

For the record then, to date, each time the CCW has raised questions we have responded: two second opinions, a structural analysis of the original building, and now a review of their “PLAN B”. We have also held open forums and visited their meetings twice to discuss the future of the high school. Their “PLAN B” document brings two concerns to my attention that continued to haunt me as I prepared this document presentation.

1) Projected Costs:

Any analysis of the necessary work needs to relate to current costs. Today the construction marketplace is so volatile that no individual without any direct relationship to the industry can present figures with any certainty or accuracy. If I were to attempt to develop a response on my own, I too, would simply be presenting questionable figures to dispute other questionable figures. The only tool that I would have at my disposal would be adding some level of inflationary cost. Even if I did this, what would be the basis for my assumptions? Would it be the “Scortino Report”? I hope not, because even Rich Scortino admits that his numbers were guesstimates, viewed as separate projects, in response to a request from the School Committee to look at long and short range problems throughout the district, and were not meant to be the end all solution. Unfortunately, his report, at the time I arrived, was the only document that made an attempt to bring to light the large scope of issues that the facility faces. Although we had estimated costs from the feasibility study, I decided to once again find more updated information in order to effectively respond to the CCW’s proposal. I, therefore, sought out a consultant from one of the leading school construction general contractors in the state – Fontaine Bros. Inc. Christopher Fontaine, Executive Vice President,

responded to my request by agreeing to review current market prices, as well as the scope of the project as he understood it. His report is attached for your review. His estimates are significantly different and reflect a realistic response to the CCW report. He estimates the costs to reach, and most likely exceed, the \$19,000,000 mark.

2) Questioning the assumptions:

In his detailed review, Mr. Fontaine questions several of the CCW assumptions, such as completing the work during summer months, avoiding ADA and other health/safety issues, segregating the work rather than doing the work from an integrated approach, and discounting soft costs such as relocation of personnel/students, fees and contingency. I, too, was concerned about these assumptions. Specifically I questioned the logic of doing the project over several summer vacations. I could not understand how this could be done realistically and economically. As he states,

"..... none of them can be considered stand alone budgets. All of them, if done separately, would be at a considerable upcharge as you would be finishing one to remove it and replace it to complete another."

My most important concern, however, was not addressing the health/safety and ADA code problems. Frankly these issues need to be resolved if any work is done to this building. To avoid them would be a disservice to the children and adults who occupy this building every day. I was glad to see that Fontaine had similar views on both concerns. Allow me to quote the report once again:

"Nothing has been included for fire alarm systems, fire protection systems, life safety upgrades, finishes, fixtures, equipment or bringing the facility to the 21st century standards."

Before I conclude this report, there were several statements in the CCW document which caused additional concern. For example, there was a question regarding renovation versus new construction and whether or not the architects estimated too much money for soft costs. Ask any practitioner whether or not renovation costs are as solid as new construction. Their answer would be those renovation contingency budgets are always larger. Even the recent Green Meadows project had a larger cost for contingencies for the part of the building that was to be renovated. Next, I would argue that from all that I have heard to date from the MSBA, they have a limited amount of money to direct to school projects. I do not believe

that a general "fix it up" project done over time and that does not address major health/safety issues and provide a 40-to-50 year longevity solution, will be supported by the State. The current CCW approach would not correlate to our concerns expressed in our statement of interest. If we implement the partial approach to addressing the condition of this facility, we will most certainly have to do it on our own without State aid.

Finally, I do not accept the criticism that the architect, Building Committee and School Committee only considered options that were excessive and the most expensive. The decision to recommend a new school came as a result of reviewing all the information that was available. To say that all of these professional, elected officials, and volunteers were myopic is indeed an unfair criticism and most certainly unjustified and designed to do disservice to the long hours and dedication to those involved. The initial Blue Ribbon Task Force agreed with my original concerns that each issue could not be treated singularly, and that to do justice to our taxpayers, a systematic integrated project that solved each problem holistically was the most economical and sensible response to the problem. This belief has been shared by every group that has addressed this problem, except for the CCW.

In closing, I would like to agree with one statement in the CCW report: "The time has come for Hampden and Wilbraham to stand up to our obligation." I could not agree more.