

June 8, 2006

To the Editor:

Having attended the Lower Merion School District ("LMSD") Board meeting on May 30, spoken with dozens of township residents and spent hours reviewing the LMSD website and proposed budget, I feel compelled to correct several myths contained in the recent letters from Superintendent Savedoff and other readers about the proposed 14.3 percent tax increase:

Myth #1: The community knew the tax increases were coming, and in fact chose them. The Board and superintendent have turned the recommendations of the Community Advisory Committee ("CAC") into a mandate to build new high schools at Harrington and Lower Merion at any cost. By the Board's own admission, when the CAC made its final recommendation in May of 2004, the projected cost of the new high schools was \$150 million. Now that the costs are projected to be \$238 million (a staggering 58.7% increase) no one is talking about the cost. The \$238 million price tag is conveniently omitted from *District Digest* (the LMSD newsletter), from the construction update on the LMSD website and from Superintendent Savedoff's letter. While there may have been legitimate reasons for an \$88 million cost increase (before construction has even begun), the Board is obligated to disclose and explain these increases. Furthermore, the Board is obligated to make hard decisions and find creative ways to reduce the cost to the \$150 million figure that the community was promised.

Myth #2: Our taxes are actually low. The Superintendent rationalizes the huge tax increase by explaining that the LMSD imposes "one of the lowest tax burdens in the Commonwealth". That is true if one defines tax burden as the ratio between taxes collected and the market value of real estate in the district. It is also true that Lower Merion enjoys an unparalleled location next to Philadelphia, magnificent physical beauty, incredible housing stock and a plethora of wonderful public and private schools. However, this does not justify a "blank check" when it comes to our schools. The only relevant figure in judging a school district's fiscal performance is cost per student. Here, Lower Merion ranks first (or last depending upon how you look at it). In the current school year, LMSD will spend \$21,875 per student. This is more than many private schools, and far more than any of the other 501 public districts in the Commonwealth. It is 24.8 percent more than Radnor spends per student and 47.1 percent more than Tredyffrin-Easttown.

Myth #3: This is a one time tax increase to pay for the high schools. The administration would have you believe that the increase is long overdue because the high schools are so old. They pat themselves on the back because the operating portion of the budget is increasing by "only" 6.3 percent and because the 36 new staff positions in the LMSD next year are to be used "almost exclusively" for mandated programs. In fact, over the next four years, real estate taxes are projected to increase by 14.3%, 4.5%, 10.8% and 5.3%. In an era of 3 percent inflation, these increases are not to be celebrated. Only three years from now, a taxpayer with a current \$2,000 bill will be paying \$2,787 and the LMSD will be spending \$30,484 per student annually. No, the problem is not the need for new schools. It is a mentality that assumes the community will gladly pay ever higher real estate taxes to fund brand new schools, bloated staff and administration payrolls (1,300 employees in a district of 6,700 students) and every imaginable program.

I am not suggesting that LMSD compromise the quality of education provided. However, I am suggesting that the board impose fiscal responsibility and make hard choices to limit current and future tax increases. Specifically, the Board must find a way to complete the high school project for the originally promised \$150 million and must make permanent staffing or programmatic changes that will limit future tax increases to the rate of inflation. If we can meet this challenge, we will continue the wonderful legacy of LM schools, while setting new standards for fiscal responsibility that will truly make us the envy of the region.

Finally, I would urge all concerned citizens to review the proposed budget, to attend the LMSD Board meeting on June 19, and to send their comments to lmsdbudget.reform@verizon.net.

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