

The Lower Merion School Board, That's Their Story and They're Sticking To It.

By Bill Manginelli

If you have any interest in safe-guarding the tax advantages of our township, your time is running out. And if you feel that nothing can be done, just look back over the last few months. You may recall that the Lower Merion school board planned to increase your taxes by 14.3%. But, after being confronted by a handful of concerned citizens who believe that you can and should have great schools responsibly, they reduced the increase to 10.8%.

The board says they were able to reduce the increase because of new legislation that "permits" the Harriton construction debt to be spread over two years. But, there has never been anything that prohibited spreading the debt. According to business manager Scott Shaffer, that is the "preferred method" and "the way we have done it in the past." The real story was that the board was afraid that new legislation would require a voter referendum in the future and so they were willing to incur all the debt in one year at added cost to the taxpayers to prevent the citizens from having a say. Lucky for them, that legislation never came, because incurred debt in the form of construction contracts was excluded from the Act 1 referendum trigger. The lesson: concerned citizens can and do make a difference. But not if they remain silent.

So why is time running out? The last step before the district can advertise construction contracts is an Act 34 hearing. The Act 34 hearing for the new Harriton project is on Thursday, September 21st at 7PM at Harriton High School. The purpose of this hearing is to give members of the community one last chance to state their support for or opposition to the project being built without referendum. If you think that the citizens of Lower Merion should have a say in the first \$98 million in contracts for a construction program that the board currently estimates at \$238 million, then you must go to this hearing and ask for a referendum.

The hearing is not about whether or not we need two new high schools. It's about the amount we are getting ready to spend without any real input from the community. The current board is spending too much money on the wrong things, with no gain in education quality for our children. Two years ago, this board said two schools would cost \$150 million. But no matter the price, this board will stop at nothing to do what it says it was elected to do; build two new schools (by the way, if you don't recall having a choice during the last school board election, I will be happy to explain to you why you didn't; all those "elected," ran unopposed).

Let me give you an example of how this board has pushed its agenda. In the June 2006 edition of the District Digest, Superintendent Savedoff states that: "*The*

Pennsylvania Dept. of Education's guidelines for new high school construction require an initial 35 acres + 1 additional acre for every 100 students. In order to construct a single school of suitable size for all LMSD students (combining Harriton and Lower Merion High school populations), the District would need a property totaling 61 acres (35 acres + 26 acres to accommodate the projected enrollment of 2600 students at the high schools). Harriton, the larger of the two current high school sites, has a total area of only 50 acres. The District could acquire additional property through eminent domain, but the costs and potential delays could be prohibitive."

But, while this may sound compelling, it is simply not true. The PA Dept. of Ed. has only one such regulation, but it actually says the opposite. Specifically, Chapter 349.7 of the PDE School Building Standards, entitled *Approval of Sites*, states: "*(a) Approvable size. Usable acreage as follows shall be considered optimum: elementary schools—10 acres; schools for middle grades—20 acres, schools for high school grades—35 acres*" and the regulation goes on to state two conditions as follows: "*(1) In general, maximum approvable site sizes shall be the stated optimum, plus one acre for each 100 full-time equivalent students in projected enrollment. (2) Minimum approvable site sizes shall consider factors related to land availability, proximate shared use land, and other reasonable considerations."*

The fact is that what the Superintendent states in the Digest as a "PDE required" minimum property size is actually the maximum property size as far as the PDE is concerned. But misreading a regulation may be understandable. Perhaps, but consider this. One month before the Digest came out, at the May 30 school board meeting, board president Larry Rosenwald made the same statement. After the meeting, I asked what regulation he was referring to, he told me he didn't know. I then naively explained how he had misinterpreted the only applicable regulation. The result was the Superintendent's write-up in the District Digest.

And, when I asked Superintendent Savedoff about this at a special board meeting on June 15th, he could not identify the regulation, other than to say "the architects have referred to it." Could it be that the man whom had just informed every household in the Township by mail of the meaning of such an important regulation (at the tax payer's expense) had not actually read it himself? Neither answer to that question is acceptable.

But the fact that the board may have chosen to mislead us is only part of my point. The real question is, why? For the answer, all you need to do is read the Community Advisory Committee report which is the 2004 report of the committee that recommended we build two new high schools (the report is on the web at http://www.lmsd.org/hsmmodernization/documents/cac_final.pdf). On page 28, it states: "*The following regulatory and logistical criteria were heavily factored in the evaluation process of each of these [school construction] options:*

- *The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has guidelines for minimum ratios of student population to school-site size. For example, for a student population of 2,500, the PDE recommends a minimum site size of 60 acres.*

So it's no surprise that the report cites this as the "most compelling" reason to abandon the single high school option, citing this "fact" no less than six times throughout the report.

There it is, the answer to the 61 acre story! It dates back to January 2004 when the CAC was first told about this phantom PDE regulation. And as a result, they ruled out building one high school because they had been told that neither of the two existing sites is big enough for one high school. That is why the Board and its Superintendent continue to tell us about a non-existent regulation that supports their decision. Because, that's their story, and they're sticking to it.

But they're not sticking to the whole story. For example, the CAC report defined the \$150M amount for the construction of two new schools as a rough estimate for comparison purposes that included "professional fees, testing and inspections, and temporary facilities, as well as furnishings, and fixtures, and equipment," plus a 5% contingency. However, Superintendent Savedoff now tells us during his June 19th presentation that "it was beyond the scope of the CAC to look at design and logistics of construction." For example, he now says that the CAC did not consider "the temporary gymnasium & lockers, the temporary parking, the modular classrooms." Somehow these do not fall under what he meant when he told the CAC that "professional fees" and "temporary facilities" were in the \$150M.

And there are other parts of the story that have changed. The CAC report shows that the two new schools are estimated to be 588,616 square feet, combined. Dr. Savedoff now tells us they are being designed for a total square footage of 666,000.

The CAC report also considers the need for a 2500-student school size even though the report projects the high school population to peak at 2517 students in 2006-07 and taper off to about 2200 students after 2010 (about the year the high schools are projected to be complete). But that's changed too! The new budget report uses higher numbers that stay in the 2500 range. Perhaps this proves the Board's point that you can do anything with numbers. The Superintendent offered no explanation for this change from what the CAC was told.

Oh, if you're wondering if the CAC was given any other misleading information, hold on. Aside from telling the CAC that, according to the PDE, neither of the properties are large enough for one high school, and that the construction cost difference between one school and two was a mere \$22M, the Board also gave the CAC operating cost estimates that alleged that the cost of operating two schools was only \$3.7M higher than one school! (\$32.4M vs. \$28.7M)

They arrived at this “fact” by determining, for example, that one school would require three professional staff members less than the two existing schools, that one new school would require seven vice principals compared to the eight required for the two new schools (that’s one vice principal for every 300 students, plus two principals!), that only one athletic director at a salary of \$86,600 would not be sufficient for the one high school option, that one new school would require three less aides, the same number of campus aides, the same number of clerical personnel, and only four less custodians than two new schools. In other words, the one school option would only allow for a savings in staffing needs of 25.78 positions (306.08 v. 280.3). I guess you can do anything with numbers.

Lies about State regulations, artificially contrived construction cost estimates, and staffing projections that hide the economy of operating one school in lieu of two are not a credible basis for a community study, and the public is not so easily fooled. The risks of saddling our community with too much debt are great and we should all have a say in that future. So, if your worried about the backlash effect that soaring taxes will have on our property values and our Township’s AAA bond rating, both of which have been established and enjoyed as a result of the relationship between our debt and our income, then its time to stand up and demand a say in what is going on. Contrary to the Board’s claims, the low taxes and high bond rating we have enjoyed are neither the result of, nor a reflection on, this School Board’s fiscal management abilities. Rather, these are a function of the managers in our past that gave us a great school district, responsibly. This Board is now laying the foundation for our future and it doesn’t want you to have a say.

Now is the time for you to get involved. Come to the Act 34 hearing on September 21st, or submit written comments to PDE and the board. The Board tells us it’s doing what we want it to do. If that is the case, a referendum vote will prove them right. For more information on this topic as well as other information that the Lower Merion School Board is not sharing with you, visit www.lmsd.info.