

June 6, 2006

Dear Main Line Times,

We moved to Lower Merion from the Connecticut suburbs three years ago. We based our desire to live in this town thanks in part to its strong support for public education. While in Connecticut, we were active supporters at town meetings of substantial rebuilding programs for every one of our schools. However, I left last Tuesday's final public hearing firmly opposed to the proposed budget and with a tremendous lack of confidence in our leadership.

Our issue with the budget is not per se the size of the tax increase although we suspect that for many this cost will ultimately deprive this town of beneficial economic and social diversity. Instead our concern is with the size of per pupil spending which is vastly out of proportion with any reasonable benchmark. The speakers at last week's meeting made a considerable point about how LM's spending per pupil would be 40% greater than Radnor. Two other comparisons are relevant.

First, LM's spending is not only out of line with our neighboring district, but also with national averages for similar education oriented communities if a comparison with the affluent towns on Connecticut's "Gold Coast" is representative. In the coming year our former home town of New Canaan will spend about \$17,100 per pupil in comparison to \$24,700 for LM – a 44% difference. The other Gold Coast towns of Greenwich, Darien and Westport spend very similar levels.

Do the children suffer educationally? Let me assure you that the documentary on the deprived school children of Greenwich, CT will not be a ratings success any time soon (even if it is paired with Desperate Housewives). In fact school children in Connecticut's Gold Coast tend to do what children of educated parents and stable communities almost always do. They thrive and succeed educationally regardless of whether their school's programs meet a silver, gold or platinum standard.

We should not however compare ourselves just to other affluent towns. There is an even more relevant comparison. If there is a single progressive bone in your body it should greatly disturb you that LM will spend more than two and half times the amount per pupil that the Philadelphia school system will spend. Here again I went back and checked to see how we compare to other regions using our former state as an example. The spending gap between Gold Coast towns and the neighboring depressed cities of Bridgeport, New Haven and Norwalk was only 17%. When asked whether we would pay more taxes for schools, we would gladly do so – just not for the LM district. If the LM school system were a car it would be a Hummer – a cash guzzler and symbol of poor design and excess (with apologies to Hummer owners).

We regret that we have only raised these objections so late in the process. Unfortunately none of the school board candidates ran on the platform to raise spending and school

taxes by 50% in six years. That would have caught our attention sooner. Nor can we say that we have sat through countless number of hours of explanation on why the costs are so high. It strikes us, though, that the figure presented by the school board may be a bit like the \$400 million “pension” paid to Lee Raymond by Exxon Mobil – a number that defies common sense and logic. This budget deserves to be rejected or, alternatively, the town deserves a referendum on this budget even if it is non-binding.

Sincerely,

Gordon & Patricia Fowler  
Lower Merion, PA.