

OPINION: A New Middle/Senior High School for Westport – one parent's perspective

As a resident of Westport with a child in the local school system I have been keenly interested in the school building project since first hearing of it in the spring of 2016. After following the progress of this project for these past months, I am convinced that the new school is critically necessary for the sake of our children and for the economic and social well-being of our community.

At a meeting of the Westport Board of Selectmen on October 30th I got an in-depth first-hand look at the final proposal for the new co-located Middle/Senior High School, and it looks great.

Here are a few quick facts to review:

- 1) The Westport Middle School was closed in November 2014 because of PCB contamination. The contamination was discovered in July 2011 and initial cleanup efforts were unable to eradicate the problem, so the school had to be closed, and the students squeezed into other schools in the district.
- 2) Since the closing of the Middle School, the Westport School Building Committee has been working tirelessly with State and Local entities and citizens to evaluate many different grade configurations, site locations and building designs in order to find the best possible solution for Westport.
- 3) Altogether, 18 different school configurations and designs on 3 possible building sites have been evaluated against a complex, comprehensive and objective matrix of criteria. In the end, the best grade configuration, building design and location was determined to be the site of the defunct Middle

School.

4) The selected school design proposal has now been unanimously approved by the Westport Board of Selectmen, the Westport School Building Committee, and the Westport School Committee and will now be submitted to the Massachusetts School Building Authority for review and sign-off.

I believe that this proposal represents the best cost and benefit combination for the town because:

1. The town will receive state funding from the Massachusetts School Building Authority for approximately half of the cost to build the new school, and for approximately half of the cost of safely demolishing and cleaning up the site of the old Middle School.

2. The chosen solution represents the most cost-effective and beneficial solution to the loss of the Westport Middle School and the replacing of the aging High School. By co-locating the Middle and High Schools, and through the use of energy-saving design and materials, operating and maintenance costs will be significantly reduced.

3. If the town rejects this proposal; we will still have to demolish and clean up the Middle School site, and we will have to replace the High School in a few years as well. But in the meantime, we will have lost the funding from the state, and the costs will be higher than what the town would need to fund under the current project proposal.

The bottom line for me is that this is really quite a straight-forward and pragmatic decision for the town. First of all because it's necessary and doing nothing (or postponing a decision is not an option). Secondly, we basically have a one-time only, "use it or lose it" chance to have almost half of the costs paid for by the State. And thirdly, after exhaustive comparative analyses and planning this proposal clearly has the best cost/benefit ratio.

Finally, there are also more emotionally-oriented reasons. The new school will be like a Phoenix rising from the ashes and overcoming the stigma of the old contaminated building, its location is one of historical significance for the town and will stand as a visible link between the past and the future, it will demonstrate to our children – and to the entire region – that Westport truly values them and the future they represent, and it will be a living legacy that will benefit our entire community for many years to come.

– Lawrence Holsworth

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