

Board of Education 15 May 2007

Last Tuesday, the \$54 million school referendum failed by a margin of 2:1. This result occurred despite months of work by the Building Committee, the endorsement of 25 out of 27 elected officials from Lyme and Old Lyme, numerous tours and presentations, several issues of Focus on Education, two mailers to all Lyme and Old Lyme households (a post card and a six page brochure) urging a yes vote and countless newspaper articles and letters to the editor.

Why did the referendum fail?

I think the principal reason is the sheer size of the \$54 million amount, on top of the \$34 million project recently completed. Another reason is the disbelief by many that a 27 year old building cannot be renovated and must be torn down. I believe the Building Committee did not present a compelling case for why the High School cannot be renovated.

The voters were disturbed that there was no other option offered other than the \$54 million plan and that no cost benefit analysis of the “critical needs” was done, as they relate to educational programs and the physical plant.

Some have commented that they believe the Building Committee presenters had a “we know best” attitude, and that they lectured to the public rather than speaking to them and listening to them. I, myself, was accused by the Chairman of the Building Committee of being irresponsible for not endorsing the project. I can tell you that my position is based on the feedback that I received from a broad range of constituents. Some believe the Building Committee was not receptive to ideas that were contrary to its plan, so they concluded they could not participate in the process.

Many have said that there was a lack of transparency about the project costs incurred and committed. There is no line item in the District’s fiscal year 2007 budget for the plan’s costs and there was no District vote during the year for any funds. I understand over \$100,000 has been spent and I believe it was funded by the contingency maintenance fund. Instead of seeking voter approval for these expenditures, the Board of Education has decided to fund them from this \$200,000 “cookie jar”. We want to know how much has been spent and what commitments have been made for any future payments?

What should we do?

We should change the leadership and the composition of the Building Committee. New members must be included who will contribute new ideas (building construction expertise, in particular) and who will work to build consensus.

The Committee should work with the Boards of Finance of both towns to analyze the financial impact that the new plan will have on the taxpayers of their respective towns. The Committee and the Board of Education should view the taxpayers as the principal source of financing for the High School, currently estimated at 75%. The taxpayers must be provided information based on the same thorough cost benefit analysis that most suppliers of financing require.

Members of the community have been working on alternate options. These options will address the problems related to the High School at a substantially lower cost than \$54 million. We believe it is inappropriate to discuss the details now, but people will be prepared to bring them to a reconstituted Building Committee that is open to new ideas.

We need not rush to submit a new plan to the State of Connecticut by June 30th. We should take our time to develop a well considered plan and discuss it with the State's School Facilities Unit. Once we have developed a consensus plan over the next few months, we can then submit it to the State for review and approval. Following approval, while we will not know the exact percentage of reimbursement, we could go out to bid and begin construction, thereby avoiding future inflationary increases.

Members of the Board of Education and the Building Committee, do not blame the failure of your \$54 million plan on the 2,784 voters who voted no. Instead, consider it a mandate that we must all develop a new plan, developed by citizens with various points of view and prepared using a systematic cost benefit analysis process. Those of us who voted against the \$54 million plan want the High School fixed at a reasonable cost and we also want to be included in the process.

The Board of Education controls the process. I urge you all to do what is right for our communities. You must insist the process is transparent, inclusive and thorough. There are many who are willing to help move this project forward and, if you genuinely accept that help, the project will be successful.