

MAYOR'S NOTES

Closing Schools Affects All of Us

Guilderland School District is lucky that it is not faced with crumbling buildings and calls for educational performance improvement. The district has performed well academically. The Business Review just released its 2014 school rankings. Guilderland now ranks third in our area, up from number six in 2013, due to the successes of all its schools.

However, reduced funding and unpredictable enrollment spurred the district to enlist the services of an outside consultant to recommend options to create better district fiscal efficiency for the next three years. The district would not want to make fiscal decisions unilaterally without demonstrating attempts to get many points of view, in addition to the views of the outside consultant. The consultant focused the results of his study largely on closing schools and presented them to the public for the first time last month. He presented dire options for the district's residents to consider. There was an initial outcry, continuing especially from the residents of Altamont since he largely recommend closing the Altamont Elementary School. The outcry about closing Altamont's community school, or any school for that matter, raises a number of district-wide issues that need to be looked at, and soon.

Community Focus groups are planned for September 20. An application is available on the school district's web site (guilderlandschools.org). I encourage you to apply to speak your opinions. If you are not among the 36 people that will be selected, other conversations are planned, but not yet defined. But we should not wait to expand the conversation beyond closing Altamont's Elementary School. I suggest, as I did in last week's Enterprise, that the district staff and board members have a lot of work to do in the ensuing months to address an array of questions that already are emerging, and which might better inform the preparation for the focus groups which seem at this point to be largely about closing a particular school. They also should not wait until a consultant summarizes a report of three dozen citizens. They should begin the analytical process now, begin to be guided by the thoughtful input already provided by our citizens, and share it widely.

Enrollment rises and falls. The consultant sees disparities in the ratio of enrolled students to a school's capacity, sometimes called utilization rates. How much and how long Guilderland's "under-utilization" rate will persist is somewhat uncertain, but focused solely on implementing a policy of closing schools to address the problem demands extreme caution. It is a complex situation which tempts school managers to assume that some of our schools are no longer cost-effective and should be closed. The effects

of the recent recession also give budget managers temptation to close schools as a solution for closing fiscal gaps. The superintendent reported to me that she and the Board of Education did not know the results until several days before their official release. However, whatever led up to the recommendations in final study, it is now the responsibility of the school district to analyze and generate discussions. I suggest they not wait until the fall to begin their homework and conversations with the community.

The task for Guilderland's decision makers who might consider closing a facility is complicated. I hope they approach the situation in a balanced way and consider a wide-range of options that they, as educators, should be expected to know. Maybe they have considered them already. If they have, we need to know what they think or concluded rather than waiting until September. For example, the district should ask itself, if it hasn't already:

- Are the budget problems related to current economic conditions or are they the result of previous financial decision missteps? Not so long ago the district decided to spend considerable funds to add another building at the Middle school which currently is hardly used? Over a decade ago, the school budget was a little over \$50 million, and this year the budget is over \$90 million. I would guess the increase well out-paced inflation. Perhaps a fresh look at how budget decisions are made might be considered as part of future discussions?
- How long and how severe is the current fiscal imbalance? The school district received an increase in school aid this year, and next year, being an election year, this trend will likely continue. These political realities need to be considered and factored into the discussions.
- Will current enrolment declines reverse and, if so, when? Guilderland's overall population increased by over 3% in the 2010 census and is projected to increase rather than decrease in years ahead. What impact do these figures have on the enrollment projections prepared by the consultant in the initial report?
- What is the district's criterion of excess capacity that determines when a school is financially unsupportable? In the study, several schools show low-use rates, especially the Middle school, so deciding how the use rates can be used to make decisions needs to be tackled seriously.
- What other efficiency options are available instead of closing a school? I would have liked that the consultant addressed other options rather than limit his recommendations to closing schools. For example, might they include potential revenue savings through revenue generation by leasing excess space like the district already does with BOCES? The district has an excellent relationship with BOCES and should look at other revenue producing options with

them. Should the district reevaluate its position on including a Pre-K program in the district, for example? Take advantage of state aid and hire a service provider to implement a Pre-K program and gain revenue for facility use while improving the early childhood program. There are other options, in my opinion, that would address the original study question of finding efficiency improvements in the next three years that should be considered other than close a school.

- What really will be the cost of transportation if a school is closed or programs are shifted among the schools? The district has sophisticated transportation software and can generate the estimates easily. What are the real effects of closing a school and shifting attendance zones? These scenarios should be tested now so we don't waste time on untenable solutions.
- A potential financial cost is the loss of per-pupil State aid funding if students opt out of public schools altogether. Eliminating a community school and/or leasing, if not well-thought out, may encourage students to exit the school system, only worsening the fiscal problems. Parents have approached me to see if they how they may annex to the Voorheesville district or start a private community school. Although these are unlikely outcomes, the potential for parents to leave the system because of the extended travel time and safety of young children on a bus for longer periods, may have the effect of flight to a private school if their public school is no longer available.

The School Board and district administration need to evaluate the consequences of the consultant's study on every school and the community at large, not just Altamont. All the economic costs and community impacts of closing a school on the entire district need to be identified and evaluated by decision makers. For example, the district needs to evaluate the cost of one-time expenditures to make an existing school ready to accommodate additional students. It needs to consider the possible loss of funding if students leave the education system. It needs to seriously consider the possibility of diminished educational outcomes and the impact on the whole district when a neighborhood school is abandoned.

In addition to direct economic costs of closing schools, there are numerous indirect costs affecting both education and the community. Schools are a key indicator of community vitality and sustainability. They influence where families choose to live, and can affect property values and tax revenues. Community schools not only provide a place for teaching and learning, but offer resources to help meet the social, recreational, health and personal needs of the community. This is especially true in

small or rural locations like Altamont. Areas without good schools do not attract young families, and closing schools can decrease nearby property values. A claim has been made by the consultant that there will be no affect on local property values if a school is closed. If these claims are not tested more carefully, we are walking down a dangerous road. Fallout from straining community relations, such as eroded confidence in decision making or lack of support for bond measures, can affect school boards for years.

These examples of the indirect and direct impact of closing public schools raise a larger question about divestment of public assets in general. We already see a politically driven movement to encourage private alternatives to public education, like charter schools. It is unclear if abandoning capital assets that have been publicly funded is not in some sense a violation of the belief system that exists between citizens and school boards.

District leadership that considers closing schools must make difficult decisions for sure. Uncertainties far beyond the immediate budget issue make the task enormously difficult. Closing a school may be the right decision, but it should always be the last resort. All costs and indirect consequences must be carefully evaluated and a fuller range of options analyzed. The community needs to be engaged as collaborative stakeholders in the decision-making process, because it will affect all of us, not just one community school.

Please feel free to contact me at altamontmayor@aol.com, if you have any questions or comments. Check out the Village website (altamontvillage.org) for information on the school closing, past Mayor's Notes, or general Village matters.

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