

## MAYOR'S NOTES

### Hearing From the Education Professionals

I last wrote on August 24<sup>th</sup> about the controversial report that the school district released in June. Following the report's release, after much discussion, seven of the nine School Board members voted to direct Superintendent Marie Wiles to refocus the discussion about the consultant's report and set aside its recommendations to close schools. Once the recommendations of the consultant report were set aside, the district set itself on a path to have a more diverse conversation district-wide about the topic, which I was pleased to see.

On November 19, 74 of the goal of 100 district residents participated in the first summit on the future of Guilderland schools. I was one of the residents who participated. We engaged in conversation in groups around the possible solutions to the district's projected enrollment declines, its excess building utilization, the current environment of reduced state aid, and getting new budget updates. Notable was the district's estimate of a budget gap for the current year of \$129,000, which is only 10% of the earlier projected budget gap, and relatively insignificant in the context of the entire budget, but believed to be short lived.

It was encouraging to hear the good news budget update, but there has to be a continued candid presentation and discussion by the district's business administrators about current economic realities, the turn-around in pension fund requirements, and other economic factors, such as new tax revenues coming into the district because of the expansion of new construction in the Town. To continue to hear that our situation is very weak which ignores these economic factors creates an impression that closing a school is a desirable option to consider. I am not denying the reality of the recent economic downturn, but there is a need to clarify and expand understanding on the district's and State's fiscal issues before any decisions are made. I hope this will take place within current discussions for the 2015-16 budget and forecasts beyond. Relief may come in the form of the upturn in the economy, the promise of state gap reduction aid; changing political environments; and new efficiencies that will come out of a larger professional conversation that will help clarify whether losing a school is foregone conclusion or not.

Results of the November 19 summit, including possible tallies of poll questions to which respondents registered their opinions on their smart phones and other tech devices, will be discussed at the next School Board meeting on December 9. The Altamont Enterprise reported the pre-discussion results in last week's Enterprise issue: "The tally showed that 44 wanted to repurpose, for example, renting excess space; 39 wanted to redistrict, meaning redraw elementary enrollment zones; 36 wanted to close a school; 20 wanted to regroup grade levels; and 13 didn't want to do any of these things." Residents were allowed to vote for as many options as they liked, so the results are duplicative counts of the 74 participants' choices.

There were technical difficulties with the poll at the end of the session, the purpose of which was to compare shifts in opinion after everyone engaged in discussion and shared information. Residents who attended were given an opportunity to respond during the

week after the meeting, but I've learned there may have been other technical difficulties which would not realize reliable results of measuring participants' shifts in opinion.

The district, however, made extraordinary efforts to conduct a more expanded conversation district-wide about the topic. I look forward to the district's summary of the summit participants' discussion, but suggest caution. The Enterprise reported that Superintendent Wiles said that school leaders, Board members and administrators alike, "heard a lot of familiar ideas. We heard variations on a theme." I hope that all the solutions which I have heard from well-informed parents and educators will not be rejected because they are familiar suggestions from the last several months. Although I do think that creative ideas can come from discussions like the summit, there may be solutions right in front of us that are being ignored for little reason.

For example, I myself am concerned that key administrators in the district have expressed little interest that I see in expanding the early childhood program, opining that the recently available large amounts of aid are only meant for urban districts, and it is not mandated by the State. I hope that this and other revenue positive solutions that would strengthen the overall district program and reputation are not rejected out of hand, and especially for these reasons. East Greenbush School District initiated a revenue generating new program for poor performing students rather than closing a school. Other districts have seen creative ways to expand program offerings based on need. I believe expanding the district's early childhood program by collaborating with a service provider of the program while paying the district rent is a very viable option. One variation of this already exists in at least one elementary school. It would improve and expand the district's early education program at little or no cost, address the unused space issue, and would reap financial benefits. It's just a suggestion about which I and others have great interest. I hope it will be thoroughly investigated rather than discarded without meaningful educator and public discussion.

All assumptions and facts should be on the table so we can make judgments that will retain the healthy school community rather than base a decision on a narrow or familiar perspective; but it is time that the professional educators step up to express their opinions too. The Enterprise reported that Superintendent Wiles believes the district reached its goal of engaging a cross section of the community and she thought a task force or advisory group might be formed. It is important to keep the community in the process, I agree, but it is time that the professional educators in the school district advise the Board of Education about the most viable options available to them. I am hopeful that at the next Board meeting where the results of the summit will be described and discussed, the Board makes some decisions to instruct staff on the data gathering directions to take as well.

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