

WHS: A 50-year Solution ***Physically and Functionally***

By Tom Goemaat, Member of SBC

The Wellesley Townsman article by Steve Gagosian titled, “*A Reality Check on the WHS Building,*” outlined the poor physical condition of Wellesley High School. There was a line about our choices in remedying the building’s deficiencies: “A *low-cost* option doesn’t exist and it really never has.” I found this particularly striking because I recall two of them which were considered:

- “Option 1” -- Phase I of a High School renovation and addition for \$20 million presented to the 2004 Special Town Meeting; and,
- “Option 2” of four options , which was a renovation and addition costing \$86 million, considered by the Facilities Advisory Committee (FAC) of which I was a member.

What happened to these “low-cost options?”

Both of these options were rejected. They just didn’t do the job. I think it is very important for our Town residents to understand why.

The first option, the article presented at the 2004 Special Town Meeting, was a proposal for just the first of two phases. Initially, the goal was to address the increasing enrollment projections only. Phase 1 had a \$20 million price tag and consisted of an addition and limited renovations which extended the life of the building by 10 years. The cost of Phase 2, a significant systems and infrastructure renovation required in 10 years, was unknown. Due to the cost uncertainty of phase 2 and the need to gain further information on all the potential options, the article was defeated at the Special Town Meeting.

In 2005, the Symmes Maini & McKee Associates Alternatives Study identified Phase 1 to cost \$29M to extend the life of the building by 10 years and Phase 2 to cost \$97 million. The total project (Phases I and II) was therefore, \$123 million. In today’s dollars, it’s even more.

The second one, the \$86 million option, is more complicated. The architects developed “Option 2” which added classrooms, upgraded or replaced systems to extend the building life to 50 years, and incorporated necessary accessibility and building code corrections. It basically combined Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the earlier option. The \$86 million price tag in today’s dollars is \$107 million. That is significantly different from the \$140 to \$150 million we are looking at today.

I want to explain why:

Although extensive, Option 2 did not fully correct the problems with the building in the areas of balancing air quality, security, and ease and cost of maintenance, among others. It also did not meet the programmatic needs of today, not to mention the future. Only partial improvements were made in multiple areas. Many classrooms were inadequately sized: Some were too big; many were too small. SpEd spaces were undersized to meet the increasing needs of our students. The cafeteria, auditorium, performing arts spaces, fitness and health and athletics spaces were all significantly undersized for even the *current* enrollment and participation levels. The spaces described were completely inadequate for the *projected* enrollment. The educational program, community use potential, and student circulation were not addressed at all.

I recall attending a meeting of the Facilities Advisory Committee in 2005 discussing Option 2. A pivotal moment occurred when the following was asked, “Why would we ask the town to spend \$86 million on a building that does not even meet the educational needs of today? If we need to invest in a project of this magnitude, we better be certain we deliver a project which not only lasts 50 years, but is functional for 50 years.”

Based on this, the FAC recommended a thorough review of the Wellesley Public Schools educational program, yielding the incorporation of many new design specifications.

The results led to the options now under consideration. Each option delivers a building which will last 50 years AND enable the delivery of the educational program. **It does not make sense to deliver one without the other, especially at the costs we are talking about.**

I would add to what Steve said before: True value and taxpayer leverage come from looking at the lifespan *and the functional life* of the building, not just the initial capital cost. I think we have the optimal options before us and the time to invest is now.

Tom Goemaat is the CEO of Shawmut Design and Construction. He is a member of the School Building Committee, is the liaison with the Permanent Building Committee on costs, and was also a member of the Facilities Advisory Committee.

For more information on the WHS building project go to www.wellesleyma.gov and click on School Building Committee.