

SENSIBLE RENOVATION AT MINNECHAUG HIGH SCHOOL

**by
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As a member of the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, I have evaluated very carefully the proposal to build a new high school in Wilbraham, Contrary to many things written about the existing Minnechaug Regional High School., the sky is not falling and neither is the ceiling. The primary mission of the school is to prepare students for their future. Based on current results, more than 90% of the graduating class go on to college, in some cases highly selective colleges. In addition our students are ranked very high on the state and national tests. While the quality of teaching and parental support are the major influences, the building facility does have a role. Apparently the existing facility adequately supports their educational experience. This is clear when looking at the performance of the graduates and their success.

While the existing Minnechaug facility is in need of upgrades, to tear down a relatively new structure to correct maintenance deficiencies is not prudent. What is needed is a "Sensible Renovation Plan" that deals with priorities and returns the facility to a safer and more secure environment in which our children can continue to develop.

In February of 2002 the Minnechaug Regional High School Principal responded in writing to the New England Association of Schools, and Colleges regarding steps to be taken to resolve certain deficiencies in the facility. He included a full list of capital projects designed to improve the facility. The total estimated cost of all those projects was identified as approximately \$9,400,000. In January 2004, the project list was updated and refined showing a total estimated cost of \$14,400,000. Many of the items on the list should be challenged for their value but some are a priority and should be resolved as soon as possible.

Four of these projects have the highest priority and should be addressed as soon as possible.

1. - Replace the existing 6" hot water line with an overhead line.
Estimated cost \$250,000.
2. - Roof repair and partial replacement.
Estimated cost \$1,176,000.
- 3.- Improve heating & ventilation of Classrooms
Estimated cost \$1,940,000.
4. - Window replacement
Estimated cost \$2,550,000.

The total cost of these highest priority projects is \$5,916,000. Allowing a 25% contingency for increased costs due to inflation or unanticipated problems, the total becomes \$7,400,000. The estimated annual costs to the average Wilbraham/Hampden homeowner ranges from a high of \$105 in year one to \$55 in the final year of a twenty-year bond at 4.45%.

These high priority projects can be completed without triggering building code upgrades. With careful planning these projects could be completed on a timely basis with minimum inconvenience to the educational process. By effectively scheduling work during closed periods and by freeing up small groups of classrooms during open times, the work and costs can be handled in a sensible manner.

Minnechaug is a regional high school. While Wilbraham supports about 75% of all costs, any viable solution must reflect consideration for Hampden and its 25% contribution. Many communities including Hampden and Wilbraham are faced with very difficult choices as costs escalate and revenue generation becomes more difficult. A sensible renovation plan is more likely to gain support of both Wilbraham and Hampden while moderating the impact on our taxpayers.

A total replacement of Minnechaug High School could be an easy answer for the problems we know about but solutions tend to bring new problem and concerns. Will the state of Massachusetts with its new funding approval system approve the project?

- ! Will the towns of Wilbraham and Hampden approve a major tax increase?
- ! What new restrictions and regulations will the state impose on our community As a result of their support?
- ! How much support will the state actually approve? Recent communications from the state suggest much less than in the past.
- ! Will the towns of Wilbraham and Hampden approve a major tax increase?

In conclusion a sensible renovation to the existing facility may not be the best solution but also the only solution.

Clearly towns will continue to feel pressure to continue services and maintain financial integrity. Let's put in place a sensible renovation plan which will improve upon our existing facilities, and not tax our resources beyond reasonable limits. We suggest our leadership reevaluate **their focus** and start now to deal with existing problems. As they point out, each passing year inflates the costs. Imagine the lower costs to solve these problems if they were completed when first identified five to

ten years ago.

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