

Lessons in economy: Renovating old schools



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By Thomas Hylton

Rather than renovate the schools it has, the Lower Merion Township School District will build two high schools and demolish the old ones. Last month, the school board approved construction bids for a \$102.9 million high school to replace its 1958 Harriton High School. This fall, the board is expected to approve bids for an even more expensive high school to replace Lower Merion High School, parts of which date back to 1932.

School Board President Lawrence Rosenwald said the existing schools are "totally inadequate" and only new schools can provide the state-of-the-art facilities Lower Merion must have to be the best district in the state.

As a fully developed community, Lower Merion has been forced to reuse its existing high school sites. More typical is the Souderton Area School District, which is abandoning its 1931 high school in Souderton Borough for a new \$114 million high school on 104 acres of agricultural land in Franconia Township.

The Souderton Area School Board rejected pleas from the nonprofit Souderton-Telford Community Development Corp. to stay in Souderton, and it turned down an offer from the Regional Improvement Consortium, a business group representing the region's 12 largest employers, to fund a feasibility study comparing the cost of a new school with the cost of

renovating and enlarging the existing high school or building a second, smaller high school.

Hundreds of school districts throughout Pennsylvania have made similar decisions. They have replaced existing schools rather than renovating and perhaps enlarging them. Often, the new schools are placed on the urban fringe, spawning car-dependent development and draining the life from older communities.

Concerned by this trend, the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Pennsylvania School Boards Association recently sponsored a publication called *Renovate or Replace? The Case for Restoring and Reusing Older School Buildings*. The booklet features essays by Gov. Rendell's top cabinet officers, arguing that renovating older schools can save tax dollars, reinforce established communities, and still provide facilities that meet 21st-century educational standards.

Gerald Zahorchak, secretary of education, writes that many historic school buildings were constructed with materials and workmanship we cannot duplicate today. Creative design can preserve a building's unique character while producing a state-of-the-art facility for students. Zahorchak notes, for example, that the Harrisburg School District is currently renovating and enlarging its 1924 John Harris High School, which boasts exterior limestone columns and carvings, complemented inside with spacious hallways and airy classrooms.

Zahorchak reports that renovating schools is generally less expensive than building new ones. In fact, a review of all major school construction projects approved by the Department of Education in the last three years shows that new construction is about twice as expensive, per square foot, as alterations and additions, when total project costs are considered.

The Public School Code, Zahorchak notes, was amended in 2005 to provide an extra state reimbursement to school districts that renovate schools. The extra reimbursement also applies to additions to schools. If a school is brought up to "green" building standards, the district will receive yet another subsidy bonus.

Other cabinet secretaries analyze the merits of existing schools in broader contexts. Dennis Yablonsky, secretary of community and economic development, highlights the state's Keystone Principles to promote sustainable development and make maximum use of the state's resources. The principles include fostering growth in core communities, preserving and reusing existing buildings, promoting walkable neighborhoods, and protecting rural resource areas.

Kathleen McGinty, secretary of environmental protection, says that renovating schools reduces the need to manufacture materials and cuts down on demolition debris.

Perhaps the most important benefit of *Renovate or Replace?* is its holistic view of school construction decisions. The role of public schools goes well beyond the education of our youth. Schools affect neighborhood stability, community character, student health, transportation, even the environment.

Among the greatest assets of Pennsylvania's traditional towns are historic architecture and the ability to walk places. If we want to revitalize our towns and protect our countryside from sprawling development, we should renovate our older schools, not throw them away.

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