

BUILDING FOR OUR CHILDREN - REAL CMS NEEDS, CONSTRUCTION COSTS REQUIRE MORE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Charlotte Observer, Patsy Burkins, Carol Sawyer, Pamela Grundy and Louise Woods of Mecklenburg Area Coming Together for Schools, a group working to build support for equity and excellence in all schools, Wednesday, July 12, 2006

We applaud the School Buildings Solutions Committee for affirming our school system's need for both renovation and new construction. Committee members have worked long and hard, and deserve our thanks. But their proposal is only a beginning. The combination of COPs and bonds they propose falls well short of the needs of this rapidly growing and changing school system.

Many projects left off the list are fully as urgent as those which were included. Our community needs a forceful, detailed consensus on the full amount of work to be done and how it can be paid for. We need to start building it now.

When asked which projects were most urgent, CMS facilities planner Mike Raible replied that the question asked him to "split the baby." Do we really want to be in the position of deciding whether it's more important to eliminate overcrowding at some schools or provide adequate science labs at others, or determining which of two severely crowded schools will get relief?

This community must find a way to pay for these other projects in the near future, or risk falling further and further behind. That discussion should begin with a thorough accounting of school costs.

One of the major obstacles school advocates face is the public perception that CMS wastes money. These perceptions are compounded by those who urge the system to build schools cheaper and faster without offering a fact-based analysis of how this might be done.

For example, advocates of cheaper schools frequently toss out the suggestion of recycling empty buildings. But there is little evidence that using such buildings will provide the same level of service while also saving money. In addition, Mecklenburg County's empty buildings are rarely located in the fast-growing suburban communities that need new schools. Even if converting empty big-box stores to schools would save money, would it be enough to offset the cost of transporting students long distances to attend them?

The Martin committee offers some criteria for analyzing efforts to reduce construction costs. These should not sink into oblivion. We believe three questions are especially important:

1. How would a different set of standards affect educational opportunities? Are we willing to sacrifice the idea that all children deserve adequate science labs, auditoriums and athletic fields?
2. Would long-term costs trump short-term savings? Would a less expensive air-handler cost more to maintain?
3. Will we take full advantage of the opportunity to save money by the proven method of purchasing and using land together with libraries and parks and recreation facilities?

Even if the school system reached the 10 percent cost savings that the committee suggested, those savings would still not meet the system's needs. Community leaders are understandably concerned about the effect school building projects have on property tax rates. We must actively investigate alternate sources of funding, such as impact fees. Politics should not get in the way of the real needs of children.

We believe our facility issues can and must be a unifier. We must work for all children to attend school in the best possible conditions. This community must analyze the real needs and the real costs of school renovation and construction.

Our new superintendent has called for community members to do the very real work of helping push our

school system towards its goals. This is one place to start.

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