

## Hard Lessons

Last Sunday, I discovered an extensive report entitled, “Hard Lessons: Causes and Consequences of Michigan’s School Construction Boom”. It was published by Michigan Land Use Institute about a study it performed that was funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The report acknowledged the Michigan Chamber of Commerce for its assistance with the project. This report is exactly on-point with many issues currently facing District 186. The following is a synopsis of the report’s recommendations made specifically to the Michigan State Superintendent of Schools:

1. Encourage school districts to invite richer and broader discussion with all segments of the community about how best to provide better facilities, preferably in town.
2. Renovate existing schools as a top priority; construct new schools in existing neighborhoods as the next priority; and construct new schools in farm fields as a last resort. Reduce costs with efficient design and shared athletic facilities.
3. Provide safe routes to school so kids can walk or bike to their classes and after school activities.
4. Improve the process of comparing costs of building a new school versus renovating an old one by paying for independent assessments, including short and long-range land, infrastructure, staffing and transportation costs.
5. When new construction is warranted, require schools to be built where roads, storm sewers, sanitary sewers, and water service already exist.
6. Strongly encourage schools to stay in existing neighborhoods.
7. Require school boards to submit a much more rigorous analysis and technical justification for closing existing schools.
8. Provide additional incentives, such as tax-increment financing tools, to upgrade school buildings in urban school districts.

Since November 2007, when I first learned the facilities committee proposed to replace Springfield High School with a new facility in a corn field on the west end of the district, I have attended most District 186 School Board meetings and briefly spoken twice in opposition to that plan. Monday, I signed-up and waited nearly two hours to bring this report to the attention of the board and others interested in the welfare of our schools and community. Funding of facility improvements was on the agenda, but discussion of the actual improvements was not. That being the case, and rules being rules, the chair had “no choice” but to deny me an opportunity to speak for the two minutes I requested.

Interestingly enough, since I had emailed this report to board members earlier that Monday, the board chair reassured me they had all seen this report before and had taken it into consideration. I asked why I had heard nothing about it at board meetings and was told, essentially, that the board was informed of many things regarding facilities, not all of which were made public. As I understand, the Mayor’s Education Liaison had not seen this report either before I sent her a copy on Monday. Apparently, the board and its facilities committee had judged the content of this report not to be pertinent to the discussion of Springfield’s school facilities planning, so it was never discussed openly.

If all of this seems just too incredible to believe, please see for yourself. Monday's school board meeting will be broadcast many times in the upcoming two weeks on Comcast Cable Channel 22 and the text of the Hard Lessons report is available online on the following web page:

<http://www.mlui.org/growthmanagement/fullarticle.asp?fileid=16633>

The Hard Lessons report concludes, among other things, "We found that the decisions districts make weave almost indelible threads into Michigan's economic and cultural fabric and help determine where families and businesses locate and whether those communities prosper or wither." And "that Michigan taxpayers and businesses are spending tens of millions of dollars on new schools in ways that weaken many communities while stimulating inefficient development on farmland and open space."

My question for the Springfield school board is whether they can learn from well-documented mistakes made elsewhere or if we taxpayers and residents of Springfield will be condemned to pay for the same mistakes to be made again, here.

Bill Castor, President  
Vinegar Hill Neighborhood Association