

The future of Meriden's high schools (Part 2)

By Brian P. Daniels and George McGoldrick

There is no good time for a municipality to undertake multi-million dollar projects, whether they are school upgrades, the installation of new sidewalks and sewers for an entire neighborhood, a new police department radio system, the repair of bridges, the expansion of downtown development, or even the construction of a new senior center. Nevertheless, quality of life and the reputation of our city are directly affected by the condition of neighborhoods, schools, and municipal infrastructure. Thus, our focus with respect to the upgrades of Platt and Maloney High Schools should be on the following question: "What makes these investments necessary and valuable at this time?" At least five reasons confirm that these upgrades are necessary and valuable and that the time to act is now.

First, the existing high schools will be almost 60 years old by the time the upgrades are completed. Physical plant deficiencies already exist, including limited handicapped accessibility, inadequate education technology, worn auditoriums, aging kitchens, boilers, piping, pumps, temperature controls, and electrical systems, inadequate ventilation, and energy inefficient swimming pools, windows and exterior doors. Continued maintenance efforts no longer can prolong the life of these systems. If improvements are not begun soon in a planned and controlled manner, major replacements may become necessary under emergency circumstances, at much greater expense, within the next few years as critical building systems begin to fail. Any argument that upgrades can wait because the walls are not yet crumbling to the ground ignores the reality of the aging, inefficient internal building systems.

Second, the Meriden Board of Education is in the process of developing and implementing a 21st Century high school curriculum, including increased use of technology and possibly the creation of a freshman academy. The physical attributes of a school directly affect opportunities to implement the full educational product envisioned in the new curriculum.

Third, the State's budget crisis is no secret. The Governor's repeated attempts to bridge the deficit by reducing aid to municipalities disproportionately impacts large, relatively poor communities such as Meriden. The Governor originally proposed to reduce school construction reimbursement by approximately 15 percentage points. Such a reduction in Meriden's reimbursement rate from the current 77% down to 62% would increase the local taxpayers' burden for high school upgrades by \$37.5 million, more than 50% of the current anticipated City share. While our State delegation has successfully resisted such draconian measures to date, nothing in the future is guaranteed. Meriden's current reimbursement rate is set to expire in July 2011, posing a serious risk that local taxpayers could bear an increased share of construction costs after that date.

Fourth, each year of delay could cost this city millions. Assuming an average annual inflation rate of 5%, Meriden's share of the projects increases \$3.5 million every year. In addition, bidding for large construction projects currently is extremely competitive due to the national economy, but these favorable conditions also create the

possibility that increases in construction costs could outpace inflation should the industry experience substantial recovery, including one due to any pent up demand.

Finally, mention has been made of a possible State-wide moratorium on school construction, again due to the State's budget crisis. Should that occur, all of the above could combine to form a perfect storm -- critical building system failures, millions in interim repairs, lost opportunities for environmental improvements and operating efficiencies, delayed implementation of the complete 21st Century curriculum, reductions in Meriden's reimbursement rate, and yearly cost escalations.

We are all taxpayers, and none of us relish the idea of projects of this magnitude. We must recognize, however, that providing the highest level of educational services to all of Meriden's children is a collective responsibility that is in the best interests of the city as a whole. We must address the conditions of the two high schools, and we must act now. Any further delay or indecision may cost us dearly.