

The future of Meriden's high schools (Part 3)

By Brian P. Daniels and George McGoldrick

The ultimate task before us is to decide which high school upgrade options maximize the return on our investment. The High School Study Committee identified five viable approaches to these upgrades, assembling information on cost, projected enrollments, curriculum plans, site selection, construction schedules, educational disruption caused during construction, and State reimbursement.

There are two new construction options. The first involves construction of new high schools on the existing sites, and the second involves construction of new schools utilizing a new site. The third viable option, the hybrid option, consists of upgrading through a combination of new construction and renovation. The fourth option is to construct a new Maloney and upgrade Platt some other way. Renovating the existing buildings as new is the fifth option.

Generally speaking, the cost of building new varies significantly depending upon the final gross square footage. Building new would present the least educational disruption, can be completed more quickly (approximately two years), and would maximize the city's ability to design spaces needed for a 21st Century curriculum. Such new construction, however, likely would suffer from reduced reimbursement to maintain larger auditoriums, gymnasiums, and pool facilities comparable to the existing facilities. The option to build new at Maloney and upgrade Platt in some other manner likely would be considered only if site limitations made new construction at Platt physically impossible.

At the other end of the spectrum, the renovate-as-new option would take much longer to complete (approximately four years of construction) and would present the most educational disruption. Over 2,000 students per school would graduate having spent at least one year in a school under construction, with at least one class spending all four years in such an adverse environment.

In the middle lies the hybrid option involving new construction of classroom and administrative wings and renovation of the existing cafeteria, auditoriums, pools and gymnasiums. This approach provides the maximum State reimbursement for newly constructed spaces and allows retention of the existing core facilities. The hybrid option not only permits flexibility in designing new classroom floor plans but also allows physical orientation to maximize natural lighting, consideration of a three-story addition (possibly accommodating a freshman academy), and overall site improvements (including security and traffic flow). The estimated cost of this option is only 10% more than a renovation like new and can be completed a full year earlier.

Two other options examined by the Committee were not considered viable. First, a limited scope option would provide the bare minimum physical plant improvements needed, but due to dramatically lower State reimbursement rates applicable to such types of projects, the cost to local taxpayers actually would be far greater than with the other options. This “pay more for less” scenario clearly would not be acceptable.

The second option not considered viable was construction of a single, large high school. The Committee was unable to identify a site with sufficient acreage to support the building, parking, and athletic field requirements of a facility educating 2,500 students annually. Further, experiences in other communities indicates that schools this

large negatively affect the delivery of educational services, increase school security concerns, and limit opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities.

A more extensive discussion of each option is contained in the Committee's report, which can be accessed from the Record-Journal and City of Meriden websites. Given the relatively small cost differences among the various options, the estimated costs of these options should not be the sole factor in the upgrade selection process. These improvements are long term investments, and we must not be penny wise and pound foolish. Meriden, like other communities, must be willing to invest prudently in providing quality education and must recognize that the returns on these investments will not always be preceded by a dollar sign.

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