EDITORIAL: Listening to the taxpayers needs to be a key element of new Quakertown schools plan

Mar 14, 2017

"Get Out Of Cash Now"
He called the Dotcomm crash, the housing bust, market’s surge since ’09. Warns of new panic. Gah. theintell.com

Any school board that’s receptive to the taxpayers it serves — and every school board should be — will take the time to listen to those taxpayers before acting on important issues. That’s especially true when the issues concern large amounts of money.

And big money is exactly what’s on the line in the Quakertown Community School District, where last week board members were briefed on a plan to build not one but two new schools at a cost exceeding $83 million. The proposal calls for a new elementary school costing $46.6 million by 2021, and a new middle school with a price tag of $36.6 million in 2029. Board member Austin Sedicum said the commitment to build the schools could “put the district on the verge of bankruptcy.”

Some of Sedicum’s colleagues on the board were similarly cool to the idea. One, in fact, suggested a nonbinding voter referendum on the plan. “I’m serious,” said board member Steaven Klein. “I want to hear from our taxpayers.”

We agree 100 percent with Klein that, given the size of the investment in two new school buildings, public opinion should be a big part of the decision-making process. Quakertown is already facing a budget deficit of $4.5 million. That, coupled with the continued uncertainty of funding from Harrisburg and the tax burden already being carried by district residents, makes gauging taxpayer sentiment a no-brainer.

That said, however, we believe strongly that a nonbinding referendum is the wrong approach.

A nonbinding referendum is just that: Its results don’t "bind" a government body to any particular action. Such a referendum is no more than a glorified survey. The problem is that too many people who participate in such a referendum expect the result to decide the matter. Recall the nonbinding referendum held on the controversial Point Pleasant pumping station in the 1980s. Bucks County voters did indeed vote to “dump the pump,” and many believed they had killed the project. Eventually, however, the project was completed. All the referendum succeeded in doing was disillusioning a lot of people.

In Quakertown, the district has already been alerting residents to what’s going on and inviting them to attend meetings of the facilities committee. This openness is commendable. To gather further input, the school board could hold a series of well-publicized public hearings. That way, the people’s voices could be heard without creating any illusion of finality that would accompany a referendum.

Ultimately, the decision to build or not build two new schools rests with the members of the school board; making those kinds of difficult decisions is their responsibility, and why they were elected. But since the taxpayers will be footing the bill, what they think matters a great deal.

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