

May 10, 2010

Letter/Guest Essay/Commentary to Pioneer Press:

It would be great if we could have more confidence in the New Trier High School Board and administration. However, they have been less than forthcoming with facts and figures. A relatively recent example involves the renovation to Building B on the Northfield campus. At the September 21, 2009, Board of Education meeting, during discussion of the facilities renovations on the Northfield campus, Don Goers, Associate Superintendent, stated, "Currently we are estimating the costs, inclusive of architect, engineering service and all the soft costs are approximately **\$6.3 million**." He mentioned that about \$1 million of this amount would be Life Health Safety (LHS) work for which bonds would be issued (no need for voters' approval is required for these bonds). About \$3.9 million would come from reserves and the rest from the proceeds of the sale of the Stuart Davis painting. Mr. Goers mentioned on September 21st that the Board would need to amend the 2009-10 budget once firm decisions were made.

Now, fast-forward to the Board meeting on March 15th. At that meeting Mr. Goers presented an amended budget to account for the expenditures on the Northfield campus as well as moving the Davis painting proceeds from the Building Capital Improvement Fund to the Capital Project Fund to be in alignment with state accounting procedures. At that time it was reported that the renovation project at the Northfield campus would total **\$8.75 million**. This was the first regular meeting where the costs of the Northfield project were mentioned since the September 21 meeting. There was virtually no explanation by the administration as to the reasons for the increase and no discussion by the Board of Education regarding the 38.9% increase in the cost of that project. Again at the April 19 meeting the amended budget sailed through final approval with not one Board member questioning or explaining this \$2.45 million increase.

It seems that a responsible Board would have asked what caused the project to escalate by almost \$2.5 million. Were the original plans by Perkins + Will faulty or were the cost estimates by Pepper Construction Company faulty or did the administration add on additional items to the budget? Please note that these are the same companies that developed and priced the administration's \$174 million facilities project for the Winnetka Campus. Board member Carol Ducommun reiterated, at the March meeting, the breakout of the funding sources as \$4.45 million from the sale of LHS bonds; \$2.9 million from reserves and \$1.4 million from the painting proceeds. Also, note that the school district's indebtedness will increase because the Board approved the sale of **\$4.45 million** in new LHS Bonds, which was projected at approximately **\$1 million in September 2009**. The Board has shown a cavalier attitude about Life Health Safety bonds, as if this was free money from the state. The fact is that the taxpayers of the district will take on this debt, basically without their awareness. Does a Board that does not question such significant increases from the projected costs deserve our confidence? This is where the lack of trust of the Board comes into play as it did with a number of other referendum-related issues.

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