

L. Merion busing imbroglio

January 22, 2009

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Like Bear Stearns, the Lower Merion School District proves once again that being wealthy and well-educated doesn't protect you from making foolish decisions.

Next fall, Lower Merion will require students who live in sections of Ardmore, Narberth and Penn Valley - within easy walking distance of Lower Merion High School - to be bused instead to Harriton High School, at the far end of the township. Residents are hopping mad, and with good reason.

The redistricting plan splits neighborhoods in two, makes it harder for parents to participate in school activities, adds to traffic congestion, wastes energy, and promotes childhood obesity by substituting busing for walking. Moreover, a disproportionate share of Lower Merion's small minority population will be bused away from their neighborhoods to provide more diversity at Harriton.

Lower Merion's predicament is entirely of its own making - a result of its fixation on making its two high schools the same size. Lower Merion High, the older school, is nearly twice as large as Harriton.

That makes sense, because Lower Merion High is in the densely populated eastern section of the township, where 70 percent of the residents live. Harriton High was built in 1958 to serve a less-dense, newer portion of the township that was designed for driving, not walking. For similar reasons, school districts such as Allentown, Bethlehem and Scranton have two high schools of substantially different sizes.

Had Lower Merion simply renovated its high schools, all would have been well. But two years ago, the school board voted to demolish both schools and build new ones on the same sites, costing more than \$100 million each. The school board reasoned that to make the schools equal in quality, they had to be equal in size. That meant increasing Harriton's enrollment by taking away students from Lower Merion. And the closest available students live within walking distance of Lower Merion.

Although the new schools are designed to be state-of-the-art "green" buildings, the scheme is anything but. A key principle of green building design is to renovate rather than replace existing structures. Another is to place buildings as close as possible to the people who use them. Another is to make buildings no larger than necessary.

Lower Merion's plan flouts all three principles. Both high schools will be enormous, with about 60 percent more space per student than the average American high school.

Unfortunately, the mentality that bigger and newer are better afflicts school districts throughout the commonwealth. During the last 50 years, hundreds of walkable neighborhood schools have been closed, usually to be replaced with large, consolidated schools to which students must be bused. Today, more than 75 percent of Pennsylvania public-school students are bused, at an annual cost of more than \$1 billion, half of it subsidized by the state.

We can no longer afford such behavior, either economically or environmentally. The current financial crisis stems from unsustainable levels of borrowing. The next crisis - global warming - stems from unsustainable levels of air pollution. Both can be mitigated by fostering pedestrian communities that make more efficient use of space, both indoors and outdoors. Walkable schools are an integral part of that ideal.

Two years ago, I edited and published a brochure, sponsored by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and sent to all 501 school districts, promoting neighborhood schools. The brochure, called "Renovate or Replace?," contains essays from Gov. Rendell's top cabinet officers arguing that neighborhood schools can help sustain older communities, protect the environment, reduce transportation costs, and cultivate healthy habits by encouraging walking.

Perhaps the Department of Education needs to go beyond exhortation. Education Secretary Gerald L. Zahorchak has broad authority over local school matters, and he has used it forcefully in the past. He can and should call a hearing to examine all the pertinent facts in Lower Merion and make a recommendation to the school board.

This issue goes far beyond one school district. Will Pennsylvania champion sustainable communities, or not?