

# 3 on board riled over Hylton proposal

Published: Tuesday, January 12, 2010 By Evan Brrandt

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POTTSTOWN — A proposal by Pottstown School Board member Thomas Hylton to replace older windows at three elementary schools and to make all five buildings energy-efficient by 2011 met with fierce opposition last week from three board members — opposition which led to one board member saying they were behaving like "animals in a zoo."

The proposal will be further discussed at 7:30 Wednesday night at a meeting of the board's neighborhood schools committee in the meeting room of the administration building at Beech and Penn streets.

Hylton is the chairman of that committee. Other members are Valerie Harris and Nat White.

Hylton's recommendations, which also include proposals for installing geo-thermal heating systems and energy efficient lighting in all five schools, came in the wake of an eight-page report on the condition of the five elementary school buildings issued Jan. 6 by Ellis Schmidlapp of Landmarks Design Associates in Pittsburgh.

That report, too, was the subject of heated discussion, with board member Polly Weand attacking it as insufficient for the cost — up to \$3,000 — to the taxpayers.

"When I first opened my e-mail and looked at this report last night I almost flipped," Weand said. "To me, this says nothing and my first comment to the board is why did we vote on this ridiculous situation?"

Weand, along with board members Michele Pargeon, Julia Wilson and Robert Hartman Jr., voted last month against hiring Schmidlapp.

Schmidlapp has worked with Hylton on other projects outside Pottstown, but Hylton has argued that because Schmidlapp's firm will not seek any of the work proposed at the school buildings, his review of the buildings was unbiased.

The report concludes that the roofs and brick work at the five schools are in good shape with "isolated problem areas" in the brick and masonry, particularly at Barth and Rupert

schools.

However, the heating and ventilation systems "are past their useful life," with the exception of new boilers at Franklin school, and "should be replaced with modern efficient systems with digital control systems," according to the report.

Hylton said School Board President Rick Huss "has directed our committee to address these issues as soon as possible, to get it done" as well as to "set some goals."

Those goals should include, Hylton said, "making each school among the most energy efficient in Pennsylvania; the most cost-efficient; the most environmentally responsible and, with a tip of my hat to you Mrs. Weand, among the most family and child-friendly schools in Pennsylvania."

Hylton also said issues related to the American with Disabilities Act could be addressed by making Edgewood school, which has only one floor, the district's school for children in need of ADA accommodations.

"Are you saying all children in wheelchairs would have to go to Edgewood?" Pargeon asked.

"Yes, currently all autistic children in the district attend Franklin," replied Hylton. "This would be no different."

All of the work outlined by Hylton, with the exception of the new windows, could be completed by 2011 for an estimated cost of \$8.3 million, he said.

He reminded the board that the "basic work" option outlined in 2008 by Crabtree Rohrbaugh had set the price tag at \$30 million — "one of the more astonishingly egregious things I've ever heard in my life" — and that the board's first estimate years ago had put the price even higher "at \$40 million to \$50 million. This allows us to do this without going through the (state's) PlanCon process because it's all maintenance; we don't have to close any of the schools and it's a fraction of the cost."

If new, energy-efficient windows are to be installed in Edgewood and Rupert schools this summer, an architect should be hired soon, Hylton said.

New windows were installed at Barth in 1997; at Lincoln in 1992 and at Franklin in 1995.

But the proposal was met with skepticism from Hartman, Weand and Pargeon, more due to the process by which the proposal was made, and the speed with which Hylton suggested it should be carried out.

"All I kept hearing here is 'I,' 'I,' 'I,'" said Hartman when Hylton had finished outlining the proposal. "Normally what happens is the committee discusses this first and then brings it

back to the board."

Pargeon voiced a suspicion that the matter must have been discussed previous "in violation of the Sunshine Law."

"I think there is a lot of that going on here," said Weand.

"Individuals can speak to each other without violating the Sunshine Law," Hylton responded. "The Sunshine Law comes into effect when there is a quorum."

Weand wondered aloud how this proposal could have been assembled so quickly after Schmidlapp's report. "Obviously, this was done a long time ago," she said.

She also raised the issue of the potential for environmental health problems to arise once work began in the schools.

Weand pointed to the discovery of asbestos being mixed into the cement when the Pottstown Middle School was renovated, a discovery which added \$1 million to the cost of the project.

She also noted that mold also could become a problem in older buildings.

"Mold closed Lower Pottsgrove Elementary School," said Weand, a former teacher in that district.

She noted that "a former school board member, whom I shall not name here, told me there were mold problems at Edgewood and Rupert," later in the meeting citing former member James Smock as the source of some of her information.

Smock, who is the superintendent of West-Mont Christian Academy in North Coventry, confirmed Weand had left a message posing questions about the buildings and he had left a reply on her answering machine. "We never actually spoke," he said.

In 2003, Edgewood was closed for several weeks in September after mold was discovered there. Mold was also discovered that year in the basement of the administration annex across from Franklin school.

John Armato, the district's director of community relations, said there have been no reports of mold problems at Rupert and that the district conducts air quality tests in all its buildings on an annual basis.

Smock said he had "heard a rumor" that there might be a mold problem at Rupert years ago, but added that was how he presented it in the message he left for Weand.

"I could go on and on about these buildings," Weand said at the meeting, slamming her hand once loudly on the table as she spoke. "These health questions have to be settled

before we go and take the windows out. We should not go forward until we can be assured the schools will be healthy for our children."

Hylton replied that none of these issues were raised, or needed to be, when the windows were replaced at the other three elementary schools.

Weand and White also sparred over whether the proposal represents "maintenance" or renovations and new construction, with Weand disputing White's insistence that the proposals are mere "maintenance."

"To me, that sounds like renovation," Weand said.

As the discussion got more heated, board member Dennis Wausnock exclaimed, "Can one person speak at a time? You sound like a herd of animals in a zoo. This is the most unprofessional meeting I've ever attended."

"There are good people who are leaving this town because they can't afford to live here, due to rising taxes," Pargeon said, adding that Hylton's proposal would likely raise them more.

Pargeon noted that none of Hylton's proposals addressed the issue of the modular classrooms now at the elementary schools and how to address the space problems that would allow them to be eliminated.

On that point, Pargeon was in agreement with Schmidlapp, whose report noted the modulars "do not provide an ideal classroom environment. We recommend a building program which can lead to their removal."

The hour-long discussion, which included a half-hour historical retrospective from Hartman on the district's consideration of work at all its buildings, came to an end with the setting of the date for Wednesday's meeting.

At the Jan. 7 meeting's end, White apologized "if I interrupted anyone," adding "I do respect your viewpoints."

Hartman also apologized for any interruptions and Weand read a statement saying, "I am not opposed to energy efficiency," but expressing her concerns about cost of the proposals, the procedure through which they were developed and what she said is their potential threat to the health of Pottstown's school children.

Wausnock, on the other hand was less conciliatory, saying, "This meeting made the Owen J. Roberts School Board look like pussycats. This is the most hostile meeting environment I've even been at in my 18 years in politics. Certainly, speak out on issues but be civil about it."