

# Pottstown School Board hires architect for 'unbiased' review

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[POTTSTOWN](#) — A divided school board voted 5-4 Thursday to engage a Pittsburgh architect to tour Pottstown's five elementary school buildings and provide a written summary of each building.

Board member Thomas Hylton, who chairs the Neighborhood Schools Committee that made the unanimous recommendation, said a vote was necessary Thursday so that the architect, Ellis L. Schmidlapp of Landmark Design Associates, could get into the buildings over the Christmas holidays when they are empty. That timing, Hylton said, would allow the school board to let its architects know what work it would like done over the summer.

The argument was unconvincing to board members Polly Weand, Michele Pargeon, Robert Hartman Jr. and Julia Wilson.

Also opposed were former school board members Judyth Zahora, Phil Thees and Robert Morgan, all of whom were in the audience and spoke out against the action, along with residents Helen Mackiewicz and Bruce Madara.

"It's a lovely idea of having five, walkable, neighborhood schools, but it may be an idea we can't afford," Mackiewicz said.

Zahora was more pointed, saying she distrusted a firm "chosen by and known only to Mr. Hylton," adding that there is no evidence that the firm had not made contributions to Pottstown Citizens for Responsible Government, a political action committee of which Hylton is treasurer and school board President Dennis Wausnock is president.

"You write about conducting business in an open and proper manner. When will your Web site put its budget online?" Zahora said of the PCRG. "How do we know you're not receiving funds from the firms you are hiring?"

She criticized the 8 a.m. meeting of the neighborhood schools committee at which the recommendation was agreed upon, saying the seemingly predetermined nature of the decision was likely "a complete violation of the Sunshine Law," which requires open public meetings.

Referring to allegations Hylton made in one of the paid advertisements he publishes in The Mercury, Zahora said, "You're right about one thing Mr. Hylton, a 'culture of secrecy' exists on the Pottstown School Board and you are the ring leader, sir."

"What day were you sworn in? Dec. 3?" said Thees. "Now we have a letter to Mr.

Hylton, not to the board, dated Dec. 14? There must be an awful lot going on besides at the meetings."

Morgan, who earlier in the evening had said, "There is very little room for politics on a board of school board directors," and subsequently insinuated Hylton had "literally screamed" at another board member after the reorganizational meeting Dec. 3, asked why the matter had not been brought before the board's facilities committee before coming up for a vote.

"Why this was brought up now, at this meeting, I'm not sure," said Hartman. "I see similar history on other borough committees with actions being taken and authorized after the fact.

"We have a committee of the whole system on this board and we have it for a reason," said Hartman. "That allows the board to have a full discussion and decide whether to bring it to a vote at the next meeting."

Bypassing that procedure should only occur, he said, "as a special circumstance and only in the existence of an emergency situation."

The last time the board circumvented the committee of the whole procedure was when it voted in October to grant five-year contracts to the district's top four administrators six months before the current contracts expired.

Hartman, who voted against the contract extensions after voicing similar objections, said the timing on the architect's review is wrong because the board's last vote on the elementary schools was on a resolution calling for the district to hold off on major building projects until the economy improves.

"Are we moving forward with five elementary schools which we cannot afford?" asked board member Michele Pargeon. "If so, I think we should put our cards on the table."

She made a subsequent motion to renovate all five schools in an apparent attempt to get other board members to commit one way or another, but the motion died for lack of a second.

"We're talking about spending more than \$3,000," Pargeon said, in reference to the maximum cost of the architect's evaluation. "We'll be talking about something bigger in February if we keep driving down this road Mr. Hylton wants us to travel."

Weand also mentioned the cost as a stumbling block.

"We can't afford this," Weand said.

"Where are we going to get the money for this project?" she said in reference to the idea of renovating all five elementary schools. "And if we can't do that, then we've just wasted

\$3,000.

"Pottstown can't afford this this year. I will not see people pushed out of their homes because the school district had to raise taxes and I can't see how this (renovation) project is paid for without raising taxes," she added.

She said an evaluation of the buildings prepared by Barry Angstadt, supervisor of buildings and grounds, is adequate, given that he works in the buildings every day and knows them best.

Board member Valerie Harris — who was joined by Hylton, Wausnock, Nat White and school board President Rick Huss in supporting the study — argued that she has found in the insurance business that sometimes spending money up front can save money in the long run.

"For years we've been talking about how the elementary schools need work and the last study we did of the buildings was done in 2001," Harris said. She added that one result of the evaluation could be a recommendation to close one of the schools.

The board, she said, needed an "unbiased opinion."

She was perhaps referring to the rationale Hylton said he provided to all the school board members prior to the meeting which noted that all the previous architect studies "had a financial stake in the outcome. The more the district would spend, the more money the architects would make."

He further noted, "We need an evaluation of our elementary schools from a disinterested architect — one who will evaluate our buildings for a set fee and not do any work or earn any fees beyond that, no matter what we do."

Resident Bruce Madara refuted that idea, telling the board, "It's sort of hard to believe anyone would have a study done without an agenda in mind."

One reason for moving ahead with renovations, the rationale argued, is "energy costs will begin to skyrocket in January 2011, when the rate caps will be lifted for PECO Energy. Also, we currently have 23 modular classrooms which are huge energy hogs and we need to start removing them as soon as possible."

During the meeting, Hylton noted that a review of the district's energy use by Honeywell International showed "we're basically wasting \$200,000 a year" on energy costs "and that's with current PECO rates."

He said even minimal upgrades would more than cover the cost of the study, adding the board already voted to put out bids for contracts under the guaranteed energy savings act.

"Each year we wait," Hylton said, "it's another \$200,000."