

REALITY CHECK ON THE WHS BUILDING

Steve Gagosian, School Building Committee

Town residents may have differing views about what needs to be done at the Wellesley High School facility, but the reality is that the physical plant is in VERY POOR physical condition. Some of the building's systems are decades beyond their useful lives and are now significantly inefficient and require constant costly repairs. Other systems are outdated and no longer able to be upgraded. A new facility or a gut renovation/addition is the ONLY cost-effective solution.

Evaluating the condition of a building requires a thorough and detailed accounting of every system. As a member of the Permanent Building Committee (PBC) for seven years, a member of the School Building Committee (SBC), a former member of the National Preservation Trust, and an architect and general contractor for 30 years, I have solid experience in assessing the condition of public buildings. The Town obtained professional assessments of the building's condition in 2003 and 2005. In 2006 the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) rated the building a "4," the lowest rating on a scale of 1-4. The results are consistent and conclusive: the building is in VERY POOR condition. Here are the major findings:

Systems at or near the end of useful life:

- Pumps and the ventilation systems are at or near the end of their useful lives. The boiler, installed in the 1991 limited renovation, will approach the end of its useful life near the time any project could be completed;
- Steam distribution piping, exchangers, system components and zone control valves operate poorly;
- Roofs and window systems are in varying stages of deterioration and most require complete replacement;
- Power distribution equipment is outdated;
- Interior lighting fixtures and controls are in poor condition;
- Full replacement of the Fire Alarm System is required;
- Security, communications, clock and intercom systems need replacement;
- Hot water heaters and storage tanks are at the end of their useful life;
- Sanitary waste pipes are not visible and their condition is suspect;
- Plumbing fixtures are original to the building additions and do not meet water conservation standards.

Systems which are inadequate for current usage and/or needs:

- There is no insulation in most walls of the building resulting in inefficient heating and cooling;
- Electrical circuits and power outlets are insufficient to meet current demands;
- Existing ventilation fans and duct work are sized to provide only 50% of the air flow required;
- Emergency generator capacity is limited;
- Data network installed in 1993 is outdated and running at capacity;
- A new water system is needed;
- Piping and shut off valves for branches are inaccessible due to all the work above the ceilings over the years.

Accessibility issues must be addressed.

Barrier-free access issues are a pervasive problem throughout the building and extensive work is required. Once a project is initiated, in order to meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and state and federal building codes, the entire building must be 100% barrier-free and will require the following:

- A new and larger elevator is required;
- All ramps in the building are too steep and need to be rebuilt;
- Toilet and shower rooms must be redesigned;
- Barrier free drinking fountains must be installed;
- All doorways must be widened to provide sufficient clearance and appropriate hardware;
- Lockers and lab stations must be redesigned;
- An accessible route to the auditorium and a lift to access the stage are needed.

It is clear that the physical conditions of the High School are at a critical point. Therefore, the focus of the SBC and PBC has been on replacement of the entire facility or a major gut renovation/addition with an expected life of 50 years, as required by the MSBA. We are not looking at a minor renovation with individual system repairs because 1) it doesn't make sense cost-wise; and 2) most of the systems are at or beyond their useful lives and must be replaced not "repaired." A "low-cost option" doesn't exist and it really never has. Patch repairs are just an expensive, slow bleed of tax dollars, and delaying a major building project only makes it more expensive.

I, for one, would like to look back in twenty years and say we really did the right things with the project and for a great price, rather than why didn't we do this when we had the chance. True value and taxpayer leverage come from looking at the lifespan of the building, not just the initial capital cost.

Steve Gagosian is a member of the PBC and the SBC, and has been an architect and general contractor for 30 years.