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## Faith broken with taxpayers

**By George Hines / Guest Columnist**

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Approximately a year ago, the voters of Reading were finally given the opportunity to weigh in on the Reading Memorial High School (RMHS) situation.

A majority voted to approve funding for design of a *renovation* of the high school. Unfortunately, those participating in the design process, and others who have now approved pursuing the recommended option, broke faith with the voters and are proposing a project that involves *demolishing* over fifty percent of a structurally sound building and building a new building.

Websters defines renovate, "to restore to a former better state, to restore to life, vigor or activity." The project you are being asked to approve at an estimated cost in excess of \$53,000,000 (yes, *million*) consists of more destruction than restoration.

Even if the School Building Assistance Bureau of the Department of Education approves the proposed project, Reading's share of the cost would far exceed the cost of a sensible renovation. In addition, the millions (yes, *millions*) of dollars we invested in the building in recent years would be wasted. It may also not have been made clear that the proposed new high school would result in the loss of a gym, a smaller auditorium, a traffic circulation scheme that brings every vehicle into a one way confined area and the destruction of a memorial to Reading Veterans.

The project proponents have indicated that there are too many unknowns about the existing building that might have an impact on cost. It seems that after all the money spent studying (three studies totaling over \$600,000) that we know more about RMHS than the ground (think ledge and swamp) under the area where the new building is proposed, and new foundations, will have to be built.

It has become very trendy to tear down existing homes, and use the lot to build new larger homes. In some cases, especially single-family, wood frame structures on a single lot, that can make sense. Tearing down a structurally sound concrete and steel structure the magnitude of RMHS and losing valuable space in the process seems like foolish unnecessary expense. Look around Reading to the many beautiful homes that have been renovated or the Highland School that was renovated into our well-used library, or the former Central Fire Station that has been renovated into a vibrant, well-used Senior Center, or Reading Town Hall, and the evidence of successful renovation is well established.

It is also worthwhile to step back and ask why RMHS is in the condition of needing such extensive renovation. It

is needed because, for years, the caretakers of the building who had responsibility for care, custody and control of the facility neglected repair and maintenance.

Basically a high school, or any school for that matter, is a commercial building that gets a lot of use and the owners cannot neglect it until it falls into a deteriorated state, demolish it and build new. Whatever happens at the high school will have to be maintained. The current architect has publicly indicated that the new high school would not be significantly cheaper to maintain than a renovated building. One could argue that, if the current designs for a new high school are implemented with soaring glass atriums, it would be significantly more expensive to maintain - not to mention operate by heating or cooling the vast open spaces proposed.

We voted to *renovate* RMHS; let's reaffirm that message loud and clear on Feb. 25 by saying "no" to a \$53,000,000 memorial to something else, and immediately set to work on a practical renovation plan that preserves our space, maintains our recognition of Reading's veterans, maintains our wallets and makes better sense.

Some of the people behind the current plan are ready to start a process that recognizes practicality and achieves a renovation we can be proud of; the folly of asking you for \$53,00,000 for a new high school has been realized. I know they stand ready to marshal the will and the forces to get the job done while respecting our traditions and our pocket books.

I had the pleasure of attending the 10-year anniversary party for the Library. It was a celebration of a great success story that continues today. When I had the honor of speaking for the Board that night, I spoke of the people who work in and use the building as the real reason for the success. The same will be true of the renovation of RMHS when we finally complete that project.

The long tradition of outstanding education our children have achieved is not because of a building, but because of the dedication of the faculty, the commitment of the parents and the hungry minds of the students. The "life, vigor and activity" will continue to prevail.

Vote "no" on Feb. 25 - then lets get on with the *real* project.

*George Hines is a selectman and former chairman of the board.*

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