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Letter: Override is preferred

Wednesday, February 19, 2003

When Reading residents vote Feb. 25 on record-setting, long-lasting property tax increases to pay for two school projects, they should remember that the proposed new elementary school is a costly solution to a non-existent enrollment problem:

There is no problem with *current* elementary school enrollment levels, which have been going down for five years and are at their lowest levels since 1997.

There is no problem with *projected* enrollment levels, which are down by nearly 450 students from the "peak" level that was supposed to occur in 2007/2008.

There is no problem with class size, which averages about 22 students and includes some with as few as 18 students. For the small number of classes with more than 22 students, the cause is not enrollment, but rather the continuing elimination of teachers by Superintendent Harutunian the past few years due to budget constraints (during which time he showed no restraint in receiving generous salary increases.)

While steadily decreasing enrollment levels and drastic reductions in teachers are reasons enough to vote "no" on property tax increases to build an unnecessary new school, there are other good reasons to just say "no":

There is no money to pay the original \$9.1 million that it would cost to build a new elementary school - never mind the additional \$2.5 million that residents are being asked to approve on February 25.

There is no money to pay the \$175,000 or more to blast and remove acres of bedrock at the site of the proposed new school.

There is no money to pay the \$10,000 or more to conduct pre-blast surveys of homes surrounding the site of the proposed school to protect the town from expensive lawsuits filed by homeowners who file damage claims as a result of the blasting.

There is no money to pay the \$150,000 or more to build a drainage system under the soccer field that is supposed to be built on the site of the proposed school (and no money for maintenance of the system).

There is no money to pay the \$250,000 or more to knock down - and rebuild - stone walls, tear down large and

decades-old trees, relocate utility poles and construct a sidewalk along Franklin Street so that children and parents can safely walk to a school.

Finally, there is no money to pay the \$300,000 or more that it would cost each year to fund the salaries and benefits of additional staff and teachers, purchase computer and other equipment, and perform maintenance at a new school if it was built.

For many residents, myself included, no money and no elementary school enrollment problems means a "no" vote on Feb. 25 to prevent a big increase in property taxes for construction of a new elementary school that we do not need and cannot afford to build, operate or maintain.

It also means a "yes" vote in April to support a property tax increase for something that we do need and cannot afford to lose: Our teachers, nurses, crossing guards, police officers, firefighters and other respected town employees, and a countless number of essential services on which we all depend.

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