



http://www.townonline.com/reading/news/opinion/ra_letraallb09112003.htm

Letter: No reimbursement is yet guaranteed

Thursday, September 11, 2003

We cannot proceed with the new \$54.9 M high school, plus \$48M interest totaling \$103 million, unless we can be assured that we can pay the whole tab because of School Building Assistance reimbursement uncertainty.

The School Committee has been spending money over the last few months on final designs with no reimbursement guarantee. Their recent vote "to proceed with construction" is based on an assumption that Reading taxpayers want the new high school so badly they are willing to pay 100 percent of the costs - without the 58 percent reimbursement they told us to expect.

This was not the understanding, nor was this the information our public officials told the voters at early election in February.

The decision about whether to move forward without any guarantee of timely reimbursement should be made by Reading taxpayers. Reading taxpayers should have the opportunity to have a say if they support moving the high school forward without any guarantee of reimbursement, financing 100 percent of the total \$103 million costs for possibly 20 years or more in the chance SBA becomes solvent.

The Department of Education cannot and will not, nor can our legislators guarantee, that there is going to be any money for reimbursement after the 17-20 year waiting period the Board Of Education is predicting. The state's debt for school building projects already exceeds \$11 billion before our new high school, along with 35 other projects that may be added to the list.

The new high school is not on any reimbursement list yet. The Department of Education has made it clear that being on a "reimbursement list does not guarantee any funding." (SBA Advisory 03-1) The commissioner stated we "need to decide whether we (each community) are able to proceed with the project without state financial assistance." (SBA Advisory 03-1)

Those new projects currently on the reimbursement waiting list have not been funded for 2 years and are stalled indefinitely. SBA has reduced reimbursement payments for this year for schools already receiving reimbursement (J. Eaton, B. Meadow, Coolidge and Parker).

Board of Ed Chairman Peyser warns in minutes of Feb. 26, 2002: "There is a huge backlog of projects that have been approved but for which there is no funding available - and for which there won't be funding available

for the next 6, 7, 8 or more years. The state has a very significant liability rivaling the Big Dig. There is a disconnect between what's actually being funded and the way the state budget reflects that obligation."

Our school officials and state representatives have known about the seriousness of the School Building situation for at least two years.

According to Jeff Wulfson, associate commissioner, " We told districts last Fall ('01) "that unlike in the past, basically any project that met minimum requirements of the program was able to get on the waiting list. We have told districts this year (fall '02), that because of the size of the waiting list, because of the Commonwealth's fiscal situation, we expect to only put the most urgent and top priority projects on the list" (Board of Ed. Minutes Feb. 22, page 42). If Reading's new high school makes the reimbursement list (yet to be funded), we will be number 383 out of 391 projects. This could explain why Reading's new high school was rejected at the preliminary evaluation stage and was denied the opportunity to submit an application. Special legislation had to be filed to force SBA to accept Reading's application for possible reimbursement list placement.

Why do I believe what I am saying is credible?

We have a very real recent example with the situation of the town center upgrade. Reading was on the state's reimbursement list for \$3.5 million for the center upgrade. We were fully anticipating reimbursement for years. Yet, we were removed from the list without any warning. That promise of money was cancelled completely. What is the realistic likelihood that we will see any money for the \$54.9 million new high school?

Town Meeting supported the new high school without a guarantee of any reimbursement. The voters, however, fully expected that reimbursement was imminent and guaranteed. The School Building Committee stated "SBA never has failed to meet their financial obligations". SBA gets their funding from the legislature and the legislature hasn't been fully funding SBA because of other state priorities.

Before the Special Election, the School Committee voted not to proceed with the new high school without reimbursement. Predictably, that is just what they are doing.

How does that set with you?

Linda Phillips

Town Meeting Member

Precinct 6

http://www.townonline.com/reading/news/opinion/ra_letraallb09112003.htm



Copyright by TownOnline.com and Herald Interactive Advertising Systems, Inc. No portion of TownOnline.com or its content may be reproduced without the owner's written permission. [Privacy Commitment](#)