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Letter: Says voters did not have all the facts

Thursday, September 11, 2003

As Reading further commits to the \$54.9 million (+ \$48 million in interest) "renovation" of Reading Memorial High School, keep a few facts in mind.

1. Upon completion of this proposed RMHS project, the high school's capacity will have been reduced from 2000+ students to roughly 1400 students.
2. The "renovation" actually comprises the complete demolition of the original, structurally sound 1953 high school. This includes the cafeteria, 1100 seat auditorium, gymnasium, locker rooms, enough classrooms to teach 1,200 students, plus some of the 1970s addition (the Industrial Arts wing, an additional dining commons and connectors). The existing 1970s library space will be gutted along with the entire Math and Science wing (including recently upgraded science labs and the RISE Preschool area) and the Field House. A four-story addition will recreate those science and math classrooms and build smaller core facilities.
3. The 1953 Reading Memorial High School was built to honor World War II veterans and represents the later architectural work of Adden, Parker, Clinch and Crimp, known across the state for school and public building design. Several members of this Boston firm were Reading residents. Prominent examples of their work are Reading Town Hall and the American Mutual Building on Wakefield's Lake Quannapowitt.
4. Despite this significance, the Reading Historical Commission wrote in a May 2003 letter, as part of the project reimbursement submission to SBA: " We are not presently aware of any historical or culturally significant features of RMHS that would preclude the additions or renovations for this project as approved by Town Meeting. Therefore we approve the site for the high school additions and renovations as presented to and approved by Town Meeting "
5. The proposed major demolition is not even mentioned in the Historical Commission's letter. As with the Parker Middle School "renovation" in which the entire building was demolished except the auditorium, the Reading Historical Commission continues to "look the other way." The Massachusetts Historical Commission is aware of the demolition but just repeats what is determined at the local level.

Voters approved the \$54.9 million at the February 2003 Special Election based on sketches and promises, unaware of any historic significance. The actual RMHS project plans, created by the fourth architect involved in the high school to date - Design Partnership of Cambridge, were revealed only recently and represent the first concrete design information released to the public.

The voting public was misled by a feverish pitch to "do it for the children," unaware of the history, viable alternatives, true costs and extensive demolition. Reading has requested from the Legislature permission to stretch payments over 30 years. If SBA reimbursement is delayed 20 years (or does not occur at all), Reading taxpayers will pay the full \$103 million for this RMHS project.

Our children's children could be paying for future repairs and renovations on the new "renovated" RMHS while still paying off the 30 year debt. Reading will have lost yet another solid public building of historic significance and paid many times over what it should have cost to renovate the high school.

How sad.

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