

Riley, Kate

From: Noam Kirson [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, December 15, 2019 1:01 AM
To: City Manager
Cc: City Council; ksalim@cpsd.us; SchoolCom@cpsd.us; Riley, Kate
Subject: Tobin School/VLUS renovation project

Dear Mr. DePasquale,

I am a parent to three children in the Cambridge public schools, including a high school junior, a 7th grader at VLUS, and a 3rd grader at Graham and Parks. Our family also lives on Alpine Street. We are therefore directly affected by the planned Tobin/VLUS renovation project in multiple ways, both as parents and neighbors.

We support the need to renovate the existing school and improve the educational infrastructure for the Tobin/VLUS community. We also support doing so in a manner that assures that similar such infrastructure upgrades are available to children across the whole city, and strongly urge the city to reconsider its current approach to the renovation project.

I believe others in the community have already written to you about their concerns regarding limited open space reflected in the current design options, as well as the need to conduct more thorough traffic studies. While we share these concerns, I would like to focus my comments on the size and cost of the project, which I believe will have detrimental spillover effects for many years to come. The project is currently planned to take 4 years and require investment of a staggering \$250 million. This figure far outstrips any of the estimates provided during the innovation agenda discussions. While the city may be able to borrow such funds at this point in time, it will limit its future ability to fund necessary investments in other schools, such as the Rindge Avenue Upper Campus, the schools currently being used as swing spaces, the Graham and Parks, and others. The future growth of the CPS system will depend on our ability to provide high quality facilities city-wide, and I have seen absolutely no discussion in the current process about how the city's capital budget will be affected. Has the city done any work to plan a long-term capital budget that can address the needs of all schools?

Two key issues contribute to size and cost of the Tobin/VLUS project as currently planned. First, the school is planned to nearly double in size, a combination of hosting new programs that are currently not part of the school, along with a 50% growth in the number of students at VLUS. It should be noted that the growth in VLUS contradicts promises made regarding school and cohorts sizes when the innovation agenda was passed. The growth in number of students is the primary driver of cost and size, and was never discussed publicly prior to the recent community meetings. I don't believe the school committee or the city council ever discussed this issue in the open. It was essentially decided behind closed doors, and given to the design team as a key parameter for their various plans. The size and mix of student populations have been explained in the community meetings as imposing a host of challenges that necessitated the expansive plans.

The second issue driving the costs is, of course, the site itself, which is associated with serious environmental problems. As a neighboring property, I am deeply concerned about the environmental hazards. While we have been assured by the city and various engineering staff that these challenges can be addressed safely, we remain troubled by the risks. But most importantly, these risks suggest we should be aiming for a smaller and more efficient project, one that disrupts the problematic site to the smallest degree possible. It is not a wise use of public funds to build such an expansive project on this site.

It is our hope that the city will reconsider its current approach to the Tobin/VLUS renovation and make significant changes to the current design options. We should consider alternatives for some of the program expansions currently planned, and have a serious discussion about the desired size of the upper school. A more modest project would still provide a significant and much needed upgrade for the school community. It would also address many of the community

concerns raised to date, reduce the project cost and timeline, and facilitate a more equitable distribution of the city's resources.

Kind regards,

Noam Kirson

