

Plan B

What to do without the millage?

BY ROBERT MARANTO

Guest Commentary

In a telling moment at one of the public deliberations about the new Fayetteville High School, someone asked the key question: If the millage fails, what is our plan B?

In reply, the consultant hired to manage the planning process said this is it: There is no plan B. Privately, school board members said pretty much the same thing. Anything less than a \$100 million school on the current site was failure, and failure was not an option. With the mayor, the chamber of commerce, the union, and even the Realtors behind it, surely the millage would pass. No plan B would be needed.

But the voters had other ideas.

I give the Fayetteville School Board a lot of credit for working hard and running an open process. Board members sincerely believed that they were representing the community. The size of the no vote shows otherwise.

Some will call the rejection mean-spirited, but that is unfair to the voters. Leaving aside the difficulties of building an Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant school on a hilly site, there were some great arguments against the millage that its supporters never effectively countered.

At 3,000 students, 1,200 more than the current high school, at a time when the city's population is stable and education experts champion small schools, maybe it was too big. For the life of me I can't think of a 3,000-student high school where I would want to send my kids. The small learning communities backed by the board have great potential, but their implementation may have proved challenging.

At \$100 million, far more than our peers spent on their new high schools, maybe it was too much. A one followed by eight zeros is a lot of digits. Anything that fancy seemed more apt to turn Fayetteville yuppie than keep Fayetteville funky.

To those of us with experience elsewhere, the current school facility seems more than adequate. Sure, it needs a new cafeteria and a performing arts center, but I know a lot of principals who would be glad to trade their high schools for ours. The Arkansas Department of Education agrees. It ranks its 1,129 public schools based on their facilities needs, with No. 1 being in the worst condition and 1,129 the best. Fayetteville High School ranks 988, better than 87 percent of Arkansas public schools.

And anyway, research suggests that once you reach a very basic level there is not much of a relationship between building quality and student learning. A \$100 million endowment could easily fund an 8 percent increase in teacher pay, probably a better bet for our money.

My own feeling is that with the best of intentions millage backers started out with an answer — we need a new building because the current one is old and our neighbors have new buildings — and then built deliberations around that answer instead of exploring a wider range of options that might have gained public backing.

Which brings us to Plan B. Plan B might start out

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with two basic presumptions. First, unlike Springdale and Bentonville, our enrollment is stable. That frees us to think creatively about how redoing the high school could help the whole K-12 system, rather than just manage its growth. Second, schooling is about relationships. Reconfiguring the system should have as its goal not fancier facilities to impress visitors, but a better fit between what our kids need and what our schools provide.

That says a lot about what we should do next. In my view, the worst thing about our very good school system is that transitions are rough on kids, and Fayetteville has one more transition than most systems. Our kids do their K-5 grades in elementary school, grades 6-7 in middle

school, and 8-9 in junior high followed by high school. We toss teens around like salad in their most vulnerable (and least lovable) adolescent years.

As we plan redoing the high school, we should consider converting our two middle schools and two junior high schools into four-grade 6-9 (or perhaps 6-8) schools. That would eliminate one transition, and give principals and teachers more time to build relationships with the kids when they are most at-risk.

The second worst thing about Fayetteville Public Schools is that we don't have enough options for kids who fall through the cracks. People argue

about whether we need one high school or two. In fact, Fayetteville already has two great public high schools, but needs three or even four to serve all.

Fayetteville High does a fine job with most students. Fayetteville's second public high school, Haas Hall, is a small, very good charter school serving academically gifted students intimidated by our large, conventional high school. Unfortunately, we have no such option for kids who need a more intimate setting but are not interested in college. It would not be terribly expensive to partner with local businesses to set up a small charter school to serve kids who want to get their high school degree and learn the skills to go straight into plumbing, auto repair, or other well-paying but noncollegiate careers. Such a school could drop our dropout rate, and attract business. It would also help keep Fayetteville High, which will always be the big enchilada, at a manageable size.

That's my plan B. It will cost less, and might do a better job serving kids.

But I'm just one guy, and a newcomer to boot. We have a lot of smart old-timers in this town, along with a capable and dedicated school board and superintendent who will go back to the drawing board and fashion new plans that the voters might like.

We have a very good school system. With the right plan B, it can become even better.

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