

EDUCATION

# Plans unveiled for new U.D. middle school

By Kevin Tustin  
ktustin@21st-centurymedia.com

**UPPER DARBY »** It has been decades since Clifton Heights had a public school in its borough, and a draft plan presented Wednesday evening showed what it would look like to have a school there once again.

Upper Darby School District Acting Superintendent Dan McGarry and KCBA Architects Principal Michael Kelly presented to community members and elected officials from Clifton Heights and Upper Darby a preview of the design for a new middle school and athletic fields to be built on a 13.7-acre tract of district-owned land on North Springfield Road in the borough.

Depending on what the school board may do with the plan, if anything, the school would be built to hold 750 or 950 students and have reconfigured athletic fields in the rear of the property. The building would be divided between community spaces (auditorium, gyms, locker rooms) that would have limited public access for certain events, and academic learning spaces on two floors that can be completely locked down from the community spaces. A STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) center may also be built into the school. For 750 students the building would be approximately 150,000 square feet.

A line-by-line list of the number of learning spaces, their square footage and per classroom capacity (in accordance with the district's education specification recommendations) was included in the plan. There would be six classrooms each for general sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade in-

struction plus foreign language, science classrooms, 15 special education classrooms and career focused classrooms for a 750-student building.

A parent drop-off/pick-up area is proposed for the front of the school on the North Springfield Road side of the property, with a bus staging area that would loop around the back of the school on to North Sycamore Avenue.

"We don't just want to build a box. We want to make sure we're building a 21st century space to teach our students," said Kelly, pointing out that enrollment, curriculum, flexibility, technology, security, code compliance, building systems and efficiency are the eight points of education and operations needed in a new school building.

The athletic fields may include a number of baseball diamonds and a multi-purpose field that could be used for football and soccer. If approved by the school board, this would be the first part of the construction project completed before the construction of the school. It may, however, disrupt community events for the 10 months of work required if it started, as proposed, at the end of the spring sports season. A playground may also be worked into these recreation fields.

What is configured for the fields and playground can be decided on with help from the community, said Kelly.

All told, construction would occur on 11.7 acres of developable land to incorporate zoning setback areas. The project could cost \$60 million to build a school for 750 students, or \$65 million to build for 950 students and would be

completed by August 2022, both costs incorporating millions to rearrange the athletic fields. Kelly said it would take a year to get the designs done, and then another two and a half years after that for awarding the bids and doing the actual construction.

Kelly and McGarry insisted that this is just a proposal and construction apparatus would not be appearing overnight to begin the work. No work will begin until the school board approves such work. Voting on the issue will only begin after they are presented publicly with the plans in an official capacity at a Feb. 26 committee meeting.

Before Wednesday's presentation the thought of building a school on the land, which currently has athletic fields used year-round for youth sports and community events, was not well-received by residents of Clifton Heights. Opposition for the idea stemmed from residents who said the district would be taking away this critical area of space that is the lifeblood of community recreation.

"Nobody wants you leaving here tonight thinking we want to take fields away from kids," said McGarry. "I coach in this community; we don't want to take fields away from anybody. If anything, we want our kids in our communities to have better fields."

A renewing lease agreement made in 1992 between the school district and Clifton Heights allows the borough to rent the 13.7 acres of land for \$1 a year, but if the land is deemed necessary for public school use, the district must provide at least 90 days written notice to the borough of its intent to terminate the contract

**All told, construction would occur on 11.7 acres of developable land to incorporate zoning setback areas. The project could cost \$60 million to build a school for 750 students, or \$65 million to build for 950 students and would be completed by August 2022, both costs incorporating millions to rearrange the athletic fields. Kelly said it would take a year to get the designs done, and then another two and a half years after that for awarding the bids and doing the actual construction.**

Value Thrift Shop

CLOTHING • FOODS • BOOKS • CDs & DVDs • FURNITURE • AND MUCH MORE!

FOR THE BENEFIT OF  
Alex's Lemonade Stand  
FOUNDATION FOR CHILDHOOD CANCER

TAKE 50% OFF

**EVERYTHING!\*** 4 DAYS ONLY:

FRI	SAT	SUN	MON
02/15	02/16	02/17	02/18

\*Cannot be combined with any other offer. Prior Sales excluded.

**OPEN: MONDAY thru SATURDAY 10-6 • SUNDAY 11-5**

710 Primos Avenue  
CLIFTON HEIGHTS

**Accepting Donations!**  
 For pick-up call 610-622-5160  
 1 BLOCK NORTH OF PRIMOS TRAIN STATION

484-461-9777 • www.ValueThriftShop.com

DELECO

PLANS » PAGE 8

# Plans

FROM PAGE 7

before the start of such construction.

Borough use of the land was agreed upon in 1977 when the district absorbed Clifton Heights schools and that piece of land on North Springfield Road.

In addition to the middle school option, KCBA Architects also looked at building a 750-pupil elementary school on 69th Street in Upper Darby. This proposal would split Upper Darby-owned public land, a total of 6.2 acres of buildable area, between a possible three story elementary school with attached community amenities and athletic fields. This option would cost \$37.4 million. This could ease overcrowding in the 69th Street area elementary schools like Bywood and Stonehurst Hills.

The Clifton Heights middle school and Upper Darby elementary school proposals are part of a five-year window to address larger-scale facility construction. The proposed schools plus a renovation at Hillcrest Elementary, and renovation and six-classroom addition put on Garrettford Elementary near the close of the one-hour presentation. "This final piece that we're presenting here today is a 10-, 15-, 20-year plan; none of this is going to happen overnight. We can't afford to do this financially overnight."

"The board is going to have so many different options to consider financially for a five-year, 10-year, 20-year plan," said McGarry near the close of the one-hour presentation. "This final piece that we're presenting here today is a 10-, 15-, 20-year plan; none of this is going to happen overnight. We can't afford to do this financially overnight."

Financing of any potential projects was not addressed during the presentation, but will be addressed at future meeting if any of the proposals move forward.

All of these options, and even a few more, are the



SUBMITTED PHOTO

This is one idea created by KCBA Architects to build a new middle school and realign athletic fields on a 13.7-acre tract of land on North Springfield Road in Clifton Heights. Depending on how many students the district may want to place in the school, the total project cost could run up to \$65 million.

result of a years-long facilities study to look at appropriate learning spaces for thousands of students in the middle and elementary schools. The district is working from the upper schools down to the elementary schools to address overcrowding in its buildings.

Highland Park Elementary is at capacity but still needs room for more teachers without any room to expand, and two schools are housed in leased buildings- the in-district Charles Kelly Elementary in the former St. Charles Borromeo School in Drexel Hill and out-of-district Walter M. Senkow Elementary in the former St. George School in Glenolden.

Drexel Hill and Beverly Hills middle schools are both above capacity at 1,400 and 1,500 students, respectively. As noted in the presentation, putting a 750-pupil middle school in Clifton

Heights would bring enrollment at Drexel Hill and Beverly Hill middle schools to 1,000 and 1,100, respectively. Going for the optional 950-pupil building brings the middle school enrollment number down to about 900 and 1,000, respectively, for Drexel Hill and Beverly Hills.

"The size of those schools is not designed for the amount of kids that they're servicing today. They're being challenged, for sure," said Kelly.

"Going from a middle school 1,500 down to 1,000, or a little over or under 1,000, is a significant educational difference, and a benefit to that community in that respect," added McGarry.

A proposed third middle school for Upper Darby would put it in line with other large school districts like Downington, North Penn and West Chester Area that have three mid-

dle schools.

Changing boundary lines for elementary schools could affect feeder school patterns to the middle schools. Beverly Hills does not have the space to put an addition on, but one for Drexel Hill could cost as much as \$80 million and make it potentially a 2,000-student campus.

At minimum, Westbrook Park and Primos elementary schools would be schools that feed into the proposed Clifton Heights middle school. Both schools currently send their outgoing fifth-graders to Drexel Hill Middle School.

The state of district facilities has been an ongoing discussion over the past year.

Quarterly updates are provided at school board committee meetings to address the changing lists of prioritized capital projects and ones that have recently been completed or

are in the process of being worked on.

A newer topic that has entered the public realm at recent meetings is the state of high school athletic facilities. Parents addressed at the January school board meeting the alleged deteriorating high school locker rooms and fields. Public disclosure of these areas was made by a former assistant football coach on their social media. This action was inferred by community members as the catalyst for the coach's dismissal from his duties in December. The district has rebuffed such claims.

McGarry was approached at the end of the Feb. 12 board meeting by a high school athlete who said they feel less of an athlete because of the facilities they have to host games, matches and meets against other schools.

"They've got to improve. The facilities at the school

district have to improve," said McGarry recalling his conversation with the athlete. "That's why we're here tonight to talk about one piece of that puzzle."

The district is already dealing with \$110 million in deferred maintenance costs across its 14 buildings. This school year the district took out a \$5 million bond and raised \$500,000 through a .5 percent tax increase for capital projects.

"Some of the things we talk about as a school district are our opportunities to unify the district and to create better learning opportunities and learning environment for our kids, which, ultimately optimizes our abilities to have excellent schools and great educational outcomes," said McGarry. "The number one topic that comes up time and time again is facilities."

"In order to improve educational outcomes we have to have the best teachers, the best administrators, but we also have to have the best learning facilities. Right now, our learning facilities are far behind other school communities and that's why it has taken this long to get to where we are with this final piece. It will allow us to have many different solutions to the facilities that we face as a school district."

No plans presented Wednesday are set in stone and these are only scenarios for the district and school board to consider reminded McGarry.

Wednesday's presentation was a preview ahead of a formal presentation of the same plan on Feb. 26 at a school board committee meeting. The school board and the public will make all public comments on the plans at that meeting.

Questions and comments can be submitted before that meeting to [committeequeries@upperdarbysd.org](mailto:committeequeries@upperdarbysd.org) and may be incorporated into the presentation at that time.