

GUEST COLUMN

Why Clifton should support school on beloved fields

By Meredith Hegg
Times Guest Columnist

Top 12 reasons we in Clifton Heights should embrace, not fight, the proposed middle school on Clifton Heights fields.

12. If the plan for the middle school doesn't move forward by January 2020, it will be delayed a full year because of the school calendar. The district estimates that every year the plan is delayed, it adds more than \$2 million to the price tag because of rising construction costs. (See the presentation on this from the Oct. 22 meeting on BoardDocs at upperdarbysd.org)

11. While our Upper Darby School District taxes are very high, they are not especially high for southeastern Pennsylvania. As a millage rate they are about average, and as a dollar amount they are actually among the lowest. Our very low and unfair state funding is the reason for this - it's not the school board's or administration's fault. Failing to build the middle school will NOT fix the tax problem. We must fight at the state level for better funding.

10. The myth that there are 1,000 students attending our schools illegally doesn't match the mathematical reality and isn't the source of our overcrowding. The school district already follows all legal procedures to remove nonresident students. Approximately 200 students were removed through this process last year. Even if another 200 students somehow slipped through the cracks,

this would not fix our overcrowding problems at the middle-school level. Our total student numbers are actually "low" for our overall population, even when you include private and parochial school kids. Furthermore, every student, regardless of zip code, deserves a quality education. We should not be using children as pawns in this discussion.

9. Our kids would be able to walk to school. The proposed middle school would take children coming from Westbrook Park, Primos, and Garrettford Elementary Schools. While the Garrettford kids would take buses, all Clifton kids would have a school right in their neighborhood.

8. Our youth sports programs would get badly needed improvements to their fields as well as a brand new gym for indoor sports and other activities. The memorandum of understanding (MOU) provided by the district guarantees that our community programs will be able to use the facilities.

7. A new school would bring young families to Clifton Heights. Ask any realtor what the biggest draw for homebuyers is and they will say the schools. A brand new middle school would make Clifton a desirable place to live.

6. A new school would revitalize the community. Our downtown is full of empty storefronts. Business owners want to see a town that is investing in its future. A new school and new fields could



MEDIANEWS GROUP FILE PHOTO

This is the sign for the Clifton Heights Athletic Fields on North Springfield Road, where the Upper Darby School District wants to build a new middle school.

show them that, and serve as the location for both old and new Clifton traditions.

5. The legal battle that the borough has initiated against the school district has been and will continue to be expensive. Clifton Heights Borough residents are paying for "both" sides of this battle, and it is unclear what the borough will gain from it other than more rising costs and taxes.

4. Our kids would get a brand new, state-of-the-art facility. Common sense and research show that high-quality facilities improve student learning and behavior. (See this analysis from Penn State: <https://sites.psu.edu/ceepa/2015/06/07/the-importance-of-school-facilities-in-improving-student-outcomes/>) We can't expect our kids to take their studies seriously when we put them in inadequate learning environments. Let's give our kids what they need and deserve.

3. Children at Drexel Hill Middle School are taking classes in the basement. Children at Beverly Hills Middle

School are in classrooms with well over 30 students. While Upper Darby High School is very large, the building is not beyond capacity. Our middle schools are. We cannot continue to do this to our children.

2. The only viable alternative to address the overcrowded middle schools is to expand the already huge Drexel Hill Middle School campus to 1,700 students. We would continue to bus our kids across town and the overall cost to taxpayers would be the same or higher because it's more expensive to add on and renovate than it is to build from scratch. All alternative sites that have been proposed or considered are way too small - most of them are less than seven acres, while the fields in Clifton are 14 acres, and just barely big enough at that size.

1. Our kids are worth it! Budgets show priorities. Let's prioritize our kids.

Meredith Hegg is a Clifton Heights resident and Democratic candidate for Upper Darby School Board.