

EDUCATION

Residents & teachers voice opinions on Aronimink Elementary expansion

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UPPER DARBY » The public's opinions to renovate and expand an Upper Darby elementary school were officially recorded Tuesday night.

After months of presentations and meetings with the community, a state-mandated Act 34 hearing took official testimony for a \$27.2 million plan to enlarge Aronimink Elementary School. A complete rehabilitation of the 85-year-old building will increase the number of classrooms from 15 to 34, increase student enrollment from 250 to 700, and serve as temporary housing for the district-wide Kindergarten Center. District administrative offices housed in the building will be moved to a leased space in Haverford Township.



A rendering of the building expansion on the back end of the Aronimink School property.

SUBMITTED PHOTO

This is one of three large capital improvement projects the district has in the works to alleviate overcrowding in schools and to bring Walter M. Senkow students back into the district who get their education in a former catholic school in Glenolden leased by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

If the Aronimink project

gets official authorization by the school board, the Senkow students would be housed in what would be the former Kindergarten Center.

Public comments on the project were mostly split for or against, opinions ranging from concerns of traffic and safety and others championing investment to bettering district facilities.

"I think democracy is dependent on an equitable education and right now there are lots of children in this district not getting their fair share because of the overcrowding issues," said Highland Park Elementary School parent Holly Clark who is in favor of the Aronimink project.

Lauren Beth Signore has a child in Aronimink, and she calls it a great school and looks forward to bettering the facility.

"We want a really nice place for our kids to be," she said. "And this place is good, we just want to make it a little bit better."

Aronimink was called a blessing for Don Clark's family and the quality of life for the school community will not be preserved with the new construction.

"What I see with the new construction is pack-



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The gymnasium of Aronimink Elementary School was filled with people in support of, or against a \$27.2 million plan to update the school to accommodate more students.

ing people into a space that nobody is going to grow or blossom," he said. "What they're going to do is stagnate."

Margaret Parenti, a former district employee who has frequently voiced her objection to the project, said she saw a decline in teacher moral and unfortunate learning spaces for students, but focused a lot of her objections around traffic and a decline in quality of life.

She believes her home value will decline and has contemplated moving out of

the district. Parent Meghan Rubino is in favor of the renovation and building addition, but wanted the project to be careful when dealing with the removal of any asbestos.

The Aronimink school campus is a large swath of green space for the community that hosts community athlete groups and other community events throughout the year. The district said it doesn't have any other pieces of property large enough to do such construction.

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By Alex Rose
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MEDIA COURTHOUSE » Delaware County Common Pleas Court Judge Barry Dozor has set evidentiary hearings for March 3 and 4 on a Revised Financial Recovery Plan for the Chester Upland School District, which is expected to include consideration of a proposal to open up all elementary schools in the district to being run by charters.

The Chester Community Charter School, the largest brick-and-mortar charter school in the state with more than 4,300 students, already educates more than half of the district's elementary school children.

The charter school filed a petition in November asking the Delaware County Common Pleas Court

to direct the district and Pennsylvania Department of Education to issue requests for proposals for charters to educate the remaining elementary school students in the district.

Chester Upland is currently in "Financial Recovery Status" under the language of Act 141 of 2012. The charter school filed its petition pursuant to language in that statute, which allows the district to convert an existing school to a charter school as part of its recovery plan if doing so would result in financial savings.

Dozor denied the petition as too vague and premature at a Dec. 4 hearing, but left open the possibility that it could be filed again. With the Dec. 20 plan now in hand, the judge has ordered the district, the state, Receiver Gregory Thornton and "all

parties thereto" to show cause why the plan adequately complies with the language of Act 141.

Opponents of the charter's proposal have argued that it could be financially devastating to the district, which is already struggling because it sends a lion's share of state funding on to charters - about 75 percent of per-pupil funds and more for special education students. They also argue granting the petition would remove any choice for parents who do not want their children to go to charters, which are outperformed on state tests by their public school counterparts.

Francis Catania, representing the charter school, argued at the December hearing that the district has been through the recovery plan process in the past with few positive results and said new ideas are

needed to drive the district forward.

Max Tribble, a representative for CSMI, the for-profit management company that runs the charter school, has also defended the proposal as one possible suggestion to right the ship of the school district, which has been listing financially for years.

He stressed that the "conversion" provision of Act 141 would only allow the district to convert an existing school to a charter school as part of the overall recovery plan if it would result in financial savings.

Tribble argued that taking on the liabilities of running one or more buildings could remove a significant financial burden for the district, which he said is currently facing about \$30 million in "immediate emergency infrastructure repairs."



He added that the district owes \$3.5 million in a lawsuit from cyber charter schools and \$54 million to the charter school for making lower payments to charters than allowed by law under a 2015 agreement that was later struck down by the courts.

Other items expected to be discussed at the March hearing include staffing concerns, special education, food service, taxation, public transportation and initiatives surrounding attendance and graduation rate issues.