

An Open Letter to the Lower Merion School District

In the coming weeks the Lower Merion School District and the Lower Merion Board of Commissioners have important decisions to make regarding Penn Wynne Elementary School. In June the BOC will consider if the temporary modules that are classrooms to more than 100 students should remain. In July the BOC is scheduled to vote on a LMSD by-right expansion plan at Penn Wynne that will decimate the open space playing field in the back of the school.

To understand the upcoming events more clearly we have to go back several years when the school board filed an expansion plan for additional classrooms and a gym at the back of Penn Wynne that would have severely reduced the size of the only open field at the school. Neighbors pushed back, arguing it was unfair to continually increase the number of students. After all PWES was the smallest campus that already had the largest number of elementary students.

During this time the Islamic Center at 1860 Montgomery Avenue became available. Although not an ideal location, building a middle school there would provide substantial relief to the overcrowding at many of the elementary schools including Penn Wynne by moving fifth graders to this new middle school.

I pledged to support the school district plan to develop this new middle school as quickly as possible because Penn Wynne expansion would no longer be necessary. In the meantime, I also supported the school district request to place temporary classrooms at Penn Wynne's open field to ease the overcrowding at the school.

Last year, there were two events that have put the BOC and LMSD on a collision course. The BOC revised our zoning code for the first time in 80 years. The school district was unhappy that their request for additional impervious surface allowance to develop their campuses was watered down. It seemed that one way the LMSD showed their displeasure was to refile their expansion plans at Penn Wynne. The twist was that, instead of proposing classrooms at the back of the school, they proposed constructing a hard court black top surface in the exact same spot where they could, at a future date, remove the courts and construct the additional classrooms they

wanted six years ago. There were no collaborative pre covid-19 meetings or exchange of ideas with neighbors or Lower Merion township staff. To the people of Penn Wynne, the LMSD's approach felt like a continuation of the "my way or the litigious highway" approach to dealing with problems.

One way neighbors pushed back was examining the 2016 temporary module approval. They discovered a severe undercount of parking spaces needed at Penn Wynne School. In October the township notified the school district that they were in code violation and needed to provide an additional 39 parking spaces. The school district responded this spring by incorporating parking into their expansion plans in a way that seemed more spiteful than sensitive. The most egregious proposal was a by-right plan to put parking in the rear of the school essentially gutting the open field space.

There is a very easy win-win solution for the school district to preserve its impervious surface allowance under the old code and for the neighbors to secure the open field in the back of the school.

The school district has already shown that it can address its parking violations by putting the 39 spaces in reserve in the front of the building along Haverford Road. This would preserve the impervious surface that they demand while leaving the backfield undisturbed, which is what the neighbors want.

I have advocated for this publicly for months to no avail.

The frustration of Penn Wynne neighbors is that this expansion is not needed and not wanted. Many Penn Wynne neighbors feel that the school district is acting in bad faith. Penn Wynne supported the new middle school, they accepted temporary expansion at Penn Wynne, and they even accepted the school district demand that Penn Wynne students, who were furthest away from the new middle school, would be bused there.

In return, the school district seemed intent to place more students in less space than any other elementary school. Penn Wynne is presently constructed to accommodate 525 students and last year topped over 800. The school district seems determined to place more students at Penn Wynne in the future.

In June, the Board of Commissioners needs to address the LMSD's request to extend the temporary classrooms. I have made it clear that I feel very uncomfortable supporting that request while the school district is in parking violation. Again, resolving the parking issue is as easy as placing reserve spaces in the front Penn Wynne.

If the BOC and LMSD can resolve the first issue, the second issue in July should become moot. The school district has filed a by-right expansion plan that places parking in the rear of the building, essentially gutting the open space play area at Penn Wynne. This "poison pill" proposal is unacceptable and in my mind should be rejected because it will provide an unequal education compared to our other elementary schools. We do not share the vision of turning Penn Wynne Elementary School into an inner city school with no open green play space.

The Township Board President Dan Bernheim has lamented that this issue represents a failure of both elected township entities to work together. As a result students seem to suffer because grownups can't resolve their difference. Dan has said that a cup of coffee can resolve a lot of differences rather than spend thousands and thousands of taxpayer money on attorneys. I'm willing to supply the coffee.

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