

WP School Board Feasibility Study Townhall Meeting Notes

Feasibility Townhall Meeting

Date: 5/28/2025

Time: 7:00pm-9:45pm

Location: West Perry High School Auditorium

Attendees

- School Board Members: Gabrielle Brandt, Krista Wills, Cassie Miller, Joyce Johnson, Robbyn Metz, Katherine Stover, Tina Magaro-Wierman, Wesley McKee (James Hamilton not present)
- Superintendents: Jeff Kuhns, Dr. Michele Dubaich
- District Business Manager: Cory Hoffman
- EI Associates Representatives: Bruce Christman- VP of Architecture and Sustainable Design, Bronsen Stone-Director of Educational Facilities Planning
- Community Members In-person and Online

Agenda

- Overview of Feasibility Study efforts by EI Associates
- Question and Answer Session

Session Notes

1. Overview of Feasibility Study Key Topics

- Presenters: Bruce and Bronsen of EI Associates
- Topics Discussed: Slideshow depicting the work completed thus far and the next steps in the process of the feasibility study.
- Key Points:
 - EI Associates found approx. \$41 million in deficiencies across the district buildings
 - EI Associates ranked deficiencies 1-4, and found that Blain EL., New Bloomfield EL, MS and HS have the highest costs associated per square foot
 - EI Associates states that they “estimate high” for projected costs and “shoot low” for projected savings

- El Associates showed through 3 methods that enrollment in the district is expected to decline:
 - PDE method
 - Kindergarten enrollment
 - Housing starts
 - Q: which of these three methods is more historically accurate:
 - A: “This data is good for planning but not dead on or absolute”
- El Associates suggested that the capacity vs expected decline in enrollment yields evidence that “there is a big delta between what we can have vs. what we do have”
- El Associates suggests that the consolidation of spaces saves money, and that every square foot=\$
- El Associates considered 5 options and together with the WP school board narrowed down the choices to Options 3 and 4, where Option 4 offers the better “Annual Net Share”
- Bruce: Is there a way to solve this puzzle to give the district more bang for their buck? It’s a square footage game.
- El Associates offered potential educational benefits including better access to special education across the district, consolidated transportation, increased safety and security with consolidated campus plans
- El Associates acknowledged potential concerns including increased bus ride time, decreased enrollment due to alternative education (private schools, homeschools, cyber schools at district expense), and loss of connection to existing schools
- El Associates reviewed the project timeline, stating the next step is focusing on concept – they have three potential sites to explore, all of which are very hilly. Traffic and bussing issues need to be analyzed to determine if it will drive up the cost.
- El Associates pointed out that it is helpful in terms of time to become a district’s “Architect of Record” but that this does not prevent the school board from pursuing other advice or employment of other architectural firms

2. School Board Member Statements- Key Points

- Krista Wills
 - Acknowledges that she has been vocal on Facebook about the project
 - Acknowledges that the decision has been difficult to make but is based on “a lot of information”

- States that whatever happens, she has the best interests of students and taxpayers in mind and suggests that we are all connected and all ultimately want the same thing
- Gabrielle Brandt
 - Asks the public to please keep an open mind
- Joyce Johnson
 - Thanks the community for attending
 - Acknowledges that there is a lot of information circulating on social media, and suggests posting questions to the FAQ on the district website, tuning in to COW meetings, attending school board meetings, and checking the district website for updates
- Robbyn Metz
 - Thanks the audience for attending
 - Provides a recap of the feasibility study endeavor, starting in February of 2024 when many of the board members had been on the board for only 2 months, they were presented with 5 pressing deficiencies that totaled an estimated 12.8 million dollars in repair from the previous director of maintenance, realized that debt would be incurred and decided that prior to borrowing to fix these deficiencies, they should embark on a feasibility study with the first public meeting taking place in October 2024. The School Board voted for EI to continue the exploration of consolidation efforts.
 - Believes that the school board cannot continue on a reactionary path as situations occur
 - Believes that the board must act in the best educational interests and use taxpayer funds with the best return on investment
 - Asks the community to reach out to the school board members with questions

3. Question and Answer Session

- Concerned Citizen #1
 - Questions Raised: If no decisions have been made, why has the district team searched for grants for the construction of a new school building? How can we make the best decisions without really knowing the cost? Why not request grants now? We cannot make a decision without knowing how much tax money we need.
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman-we aren't yet looking for or applying for any grants related to this project, that comes in a later phase.

- Responses Provided: Bruce(EI)- we do help the board look for grants during the process, but in our experience, we cannot count on grant money as historically, in other projects, what we were expecting to be awarded and what was actually awarded were totally different
- Responses Provided: G. Brandt: the board also keeps an eye on grants
- Concerned Citizen #2
 - Questions Raised: Has option 2 been thrown out? If you do the renovations under options 1 or 2, how could there be no annual savings? What exactly are the operational savings?
 - Responses Provided: J. Kuhns- we have not made any eliminations in the options except Option 5. Option 2 increases transportation cost due to double bus runs.
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman-the operational savings include staff, energy—not from efficiency but from a square footage standpoint, facility services. From about year 4 onward, there would be savings.
- Concerned Citizen #3
 - Questions Raised: she only found out about this meeting because she happened to see a sign at Village Square Plaza in Shermans Dale, and feels that people are not informed about the study and all it entails. Will it result in raising class size? Reductions in staff? Does the district have a bond initiative? Was this on the ballot? What will be done with the unused buildings? Do you have the internet structure in this area to support the added need? The tax reassessments appraisals were double and triple in some cases, so this will impact taxes further for the community.
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman- bond initiative is exactly what we are pursuing, in February PFM presented land issue options because there is no way to get this done just by raising taxes.
 - Responses Provided: don't anticipate raising class sizes beyond 25 students, the consolidation should equalize class sizes
 - Responses Provided: J. Kuhns-Even if it checked all the financial boxes, I wouldn't support it if I didn't think it would benefit the kids
- Concerned Citizen #4
 - Questions Raised: A grant could take a year once you apply? Will there be any digging before we have grants in hand? Say we get \$15 million in grants, then what?
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman- the recent one that they applied for and did not receive, took about 9 months

- Responses Provided: Bruce(El)-yes, you must spend on the design, show that on the grant application, then if you are awarded the grant they would provide the money ready to go. We advise districts not to count on grants, we are not seeing tens of millions of dollars awarded in grant money
- Questions Raised: Regarding Blain being so neglected, if this takes 3 years, are the students safe in the meantime? Are we continuing maintenance on that building? What happens if you don't sell your elementary schools?
- Responses Provided: J. Kuhns-it wouldn't be a loss because the sales are not factored into the numbers
- Responses Provided: G. Brandt-it is unfortunate that we have to keep investing in Blain, and we are in that situation together
- Concerned Citizen #5
 - Questions Raised: Experiencing gaps in trying to understand what's on the website. Where money is allocated with option 4, there is no clear breakdown of what the new building would cost. Will any other architecture firms be looking into the plan? If I am building a home, I seek various bids and opinions.
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman-a similar facility study was conducted in 2014, not as comprehensive, and the process was to vet multiple companies on the front end and then follow one. That is the same process we are following now. That facility study cost vastly more than this feasibility study.
 - Questions Raised: There are implications for the bussing, have you spoken with contractors to determine if they can accommodate?
 - Responses Provided: we have not had those conversations with contractors
 - Questions Raised: Concerns about the intersection of Waggoner's Gap Rd. and Shemans Valley Rd.
 - Responses Provided: that will be covered in the future
- Concerned Citizen #6
 - Questions Raised: Have each of you walked through the schools?
 - Responses Provided: No
 - Questions Raised: Are you all familiar with the main industry in this district? Agriculture. Taxes are assessed based on acreage and in farms that results in thousands of acres being taxed. You say that millage alone will not pay for the project but by golly it will because you have to pay the bond back sometime. You must consider the tax burden on the farmers and constituents. You must also consider the tax burden on the township regarding the roadways. The traffic will require turning lanes and traffic lights to be added to this intersection. Traffic lights cost nearly \$25,000 per year.

- Concerned Citizen #7
 - Questions Raised: Is the folder that was waved during the presentation the entirety of the feasibility study that cost \$2,000?
 - Responses Provided: Bruce(EI)-yes
 - Questions Raised: The general public did not find out about this endeavor until January or February 2025. Since that time, we have raised questions and stated concerns but have been repeatedly directed to the feasibility study website. The procurement process of choosing EI as Architect of Record did not involve due diligence. In the car analogy, you don't buy a car at one dealership without checking the price at a few other dealerships. Regarding the time limits of the options' annual net shares, the timeframes are different. One covers 20 years and the other 25, how can they fairly be compared?
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman – we are allowed to wrap for the longer time with a new construction vs. just repairs.
 - Questions Raised: has there been any independent review of the study? Has the solicitor reviewed and vetted the process to ensure that the board is proceeding in compliance with PA Code?
 - Responses Provided: yes, the solicitor has been involved
 - Questions Raised: for the next the three phases of this project, EI has been given the greenlight unless West Perry gives notice to cease design. These phases add up to the district spending 1.425 million by the end of this year, is that correct?
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman-yes that sounds correct
 - Questions Raised: regarding “sunk cost fallacy” will the board ensure that they will not commit this fallacy throughout this process?
 - Questions Raised: There are discrepancies between years in the budget line item 4000 and in the PFM millage increase recommendations. Can we sit down to discuss these discrepancies?
 - Responses Provided: C. Hoffman-yes
 - Concluding Statement: we may not get along but I commend you all for your service and recognize that we are all connected.
 - Responses Provided: K. Wills seems to commit to avoidance of sunk cost fallacy
- Concerned Citizen #8
 - Concerns Raised: due to not having generational ties to this area, his reasoning is not grounded in sentimental ideas. He expresses that he is not confident that the board will listen to the concerns being voiced. He is

concerned that the plans and estimates have not been validated by any 3rd party. EI is benefitting financially from the board's choice of Option 4 and therefore it is in their interest to show that option as the most appealing. The concern of declining enrollment may be exacerbated by consolidation as parents will choose to remove their students from in-person public education. He raises the concern of longer bus rides, decreases in test scores, and increases in taxes. He points out that the maintenance budget is slashed, and that seems to imply that a newly constructed building will have no maintenance needs. He raises the concern of what happens to the rank 1 and 2 deficiencies over the next 3 years, as the board implies that our children are in schools that are unsafe and falling apart. He believes that the 5 year maintenance plan should be released to the public and that if given the option between consolidating schools and helping with maintenance, the community would likely choose to contribute to the maintenance. He states that the promised tax cuts are not going to happen. He wonders if the burden on the water system and sewage system has been considered in the single campus planning. He acknowledges that grants cannot be relied upon due to the federal administration's current cuts to promised funding. He points out that half of our students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Can their parents afford gas, or taking off work, if their students miss the bus? Will this effort deepen educational inequity in our district? Special ed has been understaffed and it is unclear if this plan addresses those needs. Has pre-k been accounted for? The district staff likely have opinions but fear retaliation due to a recent board policy restricting speech of employees. He maintains that the board should encourage free speech of educators. He wonders how the consolidation aligns with the mission/vision of the district.

- Responses Provided: Pre-K has been accounted for and included in all the planning.
- Concerned Citizen #9
 - Questions Raised: Is it true that the board is considering K-12 bussing?
 - Responses provided: Yes
 - Questions/Concerns raised: K-12 bussing cannot be an option. What if the enrollment numbers do go up? This consolidation could be short-sighted. How long will the kids be on the bus? Is construction for building additions going to be underway while students are in school? That is unsafe and must be avoided. She believes that largely farmers are going to be footing the bill for this effort.
- Concerned Citizen #10

- Question Raised: quoting from the FAQ's, "cost savings estimates are still being validated and analyzed. We are committed to providing a more detailed breakdown of projected savings" when can the public expect this detailed breakdown? Actually though Mr. Hoffman spoke about some of the factors. Is the reason you mentioned staff first because that is the biggest area of savings?
- Responses Provided: C. Hoffman- yes, that is expected to be the biggest savings
- Question Raised: so to be clear, savings on staff, not energy efficiency or capacity, staff—that's the largest savings?
- Responses Provided: C. Hoffman – yes, that's one of the largest expenses of a school district, staff.
- Responses Provided: K. Wills – it has already been stated that savings in staff is not cuts, but through attrition.
- Concerned Citizen #11
 - Questions Raised: This is a big change and could lead to lack of stability for our students. How long do you anticipate it will take for this to all level out for the kids to actually benefit from the professional development?
 - Response Provided: G. Brandt- this was an aspect that really speaks to me as it makes sense to have colleagues all together so that they can collaborate more efficiently.
 - Concerns Raised: he is also concerned about the K-12 bussing from a bullying aspect.
- Concerned Citizen #12
 - Questions Raised: Will you vote by what the vast majority of the community wants?
 - Responses Provided: G. Brandt-it is a long process, but I like the idea. However, there is a lot of studying that needs to be done. I was elected by a majority of this district to do a job, my job is to do the best by the taxpayers and the children. I hear that K-12 bussing is a problem, I'm going to listen to my constituents.
 - Responses Provided: R. Metz-I'm very sentimental about closing Blain. No one wants to close our schools. Our most vulnerable students were consolidated to Blain for special education and they ride the bus 80-90 minutes in some cases. At one point several seasoned NBE teachers left and we couldn't pick people up and move them from one school to another, so there was a loss of mentorship. I have to do what is best for the students.
 - Question Raised: do you know "what's best" better than the community?

- Responses Provided: K. Wills- the vast majority of people that I know are in favor of Option 4.
- Responses Provided: C. Miller-would you be ok with raising taxes every year?
- Responses Provided: J. Johnson- regarding whether the majority of my constituents are for consolidation, some yes and some no. We are so early in understanding, that more people are engaged in learning and understanding.
- Responses Provided: R. Metz- If I looked at the pros and cons, the only hang up I have is transportation
- Responses Provided: J. Johnson- Mr. Dixon, if you say that there is evidence that K-12 bussing doesn't work, please send me the statistics.
- Responses Provided: R. Metz- I must do what is in the best interests of the students and best use of taxpayer dollars
- Responses Provided: K. Wills -regarding taxes, for months we went to commissioner meetings, and when reassessments came up I said that the school board would be blamed. We are not responsible for the reassessments, you can and should direct those concerns to the commissioners.
- Responses Provided: K. Stover- I will vote according to my constituents, if I believe that I have heard from the vast majority, but I do not believe that I have yet.
- Responses Provided: T. Magaro-Wierman- I represent Blain. I did not want to close Blain, but then we got hit with reality. I'm going to do what's best for the kids. No one has come up with a solution.
- Questions Raised: Who gets to decide what's best for the kids?
- Responses Provided: W. McKee- you guys are only a portion, we are still collecting data, we are here to do what's best for the kids. He owns property in a district that is K-12. He is not saying it is right or good, but it is possible. It's out there. It's not new. Also as a coach he hears the things that kids say and know, which can be inappropriate, but they know at a young age and this happens due to homelife, not necessarily at school. He claims there is nothing they can do about homelife.
- Concerned Citizen #13
 - Concerns Raised: Regarding the 20/25 years differentiation on the annual net shares, those differences add up to 2 million dollars and it is relevant. She hopes that this issue would be put to a general vote. If HVAC was replaced or fixed with COVID money that should not be an identified deficiency and certainly not the most costly deficiency as was stated earlier by EI. She

believes parents should have more say than board members regarding the best interests of their children.

- Concerned Citizen #14
 - Concerns Raised: The board should consider the emotional impact of having K-12 bussing and also of having 7th-12th grades in the same school. Chambersburg School District did this and found out it doesn't work. Furthermore, she believes the communication to get this out has not been the best.
 - Responses: Don't districts in our county have K-12 bussing? Greenwood and Newport? Yes.

4. Closing Remarks

- R Metz – thanks for attending the Feasibility Study Townhall.

Prepared By

- West Perry Parent, May 29, 2025
- DISCLAIMER: The above meeting notes have been summarized to the best of the preparer's ability and are intended to reflect the key points of discussion. However, they may not include all details or accurately capture the full context of the conversations. Readers are encouraged to refer to other official records or transcripts for complete accuracy.