

Phila. School Construction Seeking input on an ambitious project

MARCH 6 2005

The two new stadiums in Philadelphia cost about \$1 billion.

The rejected proposals to develop Penn's Landing would have cost in the ballpark of \$250 million.

The new home for the Barnes Foundation art collection is supposed to cost about \$100 million.

What do all three projects have in common? Each has been the cause of long, loud, thorough public dialogue. Each cost well south of \$1.5 billion.

Why choose that figure, \$1.5 billion?

Well, that's the size, by conservative estimate, of the school construction and renovation program the School District of Philadelphia has begun under the hyperkinetic direction of superintendent Paul Vallas.

Schools are being closed. Schools are being renovated. Schools are being gutted, redone, expanded. New schools are being designed and built.

The program is huge in dollars. It is huge in impact on children. And it is equally huge in terms of impact on city neighborhoods, their civic life, housing stock and economic potential.

Yet the public dialogue on this vast effort has been a relative murmur.

To promote a more robust public conversation, The Inquirer Editorial Board is joining with several partners to sponsor a series of forums on urban school design.

The first event of this Franklin Conference on School Design will be held from 3:30 to 7:30 p.m. March 28 at the World Cafe Live, 3025 Walnut St. University of Pennsylvania President Amy Gutmann will open the event, followed by a panel of experts in school design, planning and teaching. A light supper will be served, with table discussion of the issues.

Vallas and his team have been reaching out to consult with communities where early school projects are happening. But there has been no citywide dialogue on the goals and details of the program.

Partly that's because Vallas is a man with an urgent sense of mission and clear ideas on how to proceed. He and his team want useful input, but fear getting bogged down in contentiousness. The state takeover of the system, which insulates it from City Hall politics, contributes to the relative quiet.

Still, \$1.5 billion is a ton of money, and schools are as important an investment as any city can make. Well-designed schools can not only boost education, they can become vibrant nerve centers in reviving neighborhoods. Badly designed schools can fail kids and become a brooding, alienating presence.

All of Philadelphia, in fact all of this region, has a stake in this project being done with vision and skill.

That's why the Editorial Board of The Inquirer is joining with the University of Pennsylvania Institute for Urban Research, Penn Praxis, the Center for School Study Councils, the Design Advocacy Group and the William Penn Foundation to hold these forums.

The idea is for a project similar to the successful 2003 Penn's Landing Forums, which were cosponsored by many of the same partners and attended by hundreds of citizens, including prominent developers and architects. The work citizens did eventually influenced city officials to reject the finalist proposals for the riverfront tract as inadequate.

The goal now is a similarly fruitful marriage of expert knowledge and citizen dialogue. It's been a long time since Philadelphia built many schools. Few Philadelphians are likely to be familiar with best practices and new ideas for building schools that work for kids, teachers and communities.

So the forums will combine input from school-design experts with citizen dialogues on how to apply the experts' ideas to the particular needs and circumstances of Philadelphia neighborhoods.

The goal is to do this in cooperation with the school district. Discussions with district officials are continuing. The aim certainly is not to stop progress. It is to see new schools built and built well, to make this the best \$1.5 billion investment Philadelphia has ever made.

If you are interested in taking part, e-mail school@design.upenn.edu or call 215-573-8720 with your name, contact information, neighborhood and, if applicable, institutional affiliation. If you can't make it on March 28, but would like to be included in future events, please e-mail or call in your information.