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## Fruitport Area News

This paper's purpose for existence is to be beneficial to this community in any way it can. FAN publishes 8,000 copies six times a year and copies are mailed to all of the 6,000 plus households in Fruitport and Sullivan townships plus additional copies mailed to subscribers and businesses in surrounding areas.

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## School facilities for the long haul

Fruitport Community Schools' request for an \$8.6 million bond issue to renovate and upgrade school classrooms is reasonable — needed, in fact. The bond proposal for the February 23 ballot is just a tad more than a tenth of the \$83 million proposal roundly defeated by Fruitport taxpayers a year ago.

The former bond proposal was way over the top in a time of serious economic downturn and county-wide shrinking enrollment, and Fruitport voters recognized this. Even though the stock market is currently up and many people are returning to work, a recent report that new construction in our region is off by 68 percent continues to make taxpayers nervous about expansive commitments. Across Muskegon County, state funding, which accounts for 90 percent of each district's revenue, has been cut this year by about 2 1/2 percent, with a whopping 10 percent cut expected for next school year, according to a report by MAISD Superintendent Susan Meston in the January MAISD News.

In 1981, New Hampshire was the only state that had no state aid for its public schools, yet the Granite State's high school seniors had the highest SAT scores in the nation, according to a federal report, A Nation at Risk. New Hampshire school districts relied solely on property taxes for funding, and kept their per-pupil costs low by using parents and grandparents as volunteers.

Since then, New Hampshire has followed the "broad way" to state aid for its local schools. Its seniors' SAT scores have plummeted.

Yet our school buildings do need repair, in some instances direly so. Fruitport Superintendent Robert Szymoniak was joined by director of operations John Winkas at the January 11 meeting of Fruitport Township's board of trustees to lay out Fruitport Community Schools' repair and upgrade needs. Several roofs are 25 or more years old, they said, and the middle school roof leaks. Many doors and windows need replacement. The middle school, erected 41 years ago, is still using a four-decades old, inefficient, 1960s-technology boiler. Many classroom thermostats don't work, so that teachers and students are often forced to open windows, letting expensive, tax-funded heat out into the winter sky.

Too, many student computers are 10 years old, with the average age being 7 3/4 years. Extensive rewiring must be done, to include not only the computer network, but heating and many lighting circuits.

An information pamphlet about the bond election states that, since every homestead now pays three mills toward debt retirement, it is estimated that the \$8.6 million can be raised without raising the tax rate. The payoff is expected to be 17 years for these upgrades, to be completed by the summer of 2012. The cost should be about \$1,500+ per pupil by this writer's calculations.

The Fruitport School Board makes much of the fact that our buildings are 40 to 60 years old. Is this "old," really? Let's put this in perspective. As a substitute teacher, I've been in every public high and middle school in Muskegon County, and many in Ottawa, Kent and Newaygo

counties. These buildings range from brand new, with the latest "gee whiz" technology installed as part of the package, to about 90 years old, with slate blackboards and hardwood floors.

I find it interesting that possibly the best-constructed high school facility in West Michigan is the venerable Muskegon High School, which in about a decade will reach the century mark. Of brick and granite construction, it has substantial oak woodwork, plastered walls, and hardwood floors. And — oh, yes — those pesky slate blackboards, which use centuries-old chalk technology. I've seen the city hall in Brussels, Belgium, built in 1492, and still doing daily service. MHS, like the Brussels City Hall, might well last half a millennium, if kept in repair. Or consider the Besse High School in Maine, where I, my parents, and most of my siblings got their early education. Built 97 years ago when my grandfather was superintendent of schools, it was remodeled after a fire in 1957. Today the town hall and community center, this two-story brick building is still in fine shape. My point: school construction and upgrades, even in today's culture where goods are thrown away like bread wrappers, should be viewed as long-term investments.

The yo-yo swing of architectural standards for school construction, which perennially pushes the cost higher, is puzzling. Many area schools built in the 1950s or earlier had their large, sunny windows boarded up to save heat during the fuel crisis of the 1970s. Some newer buildings, though, have classrooms along inside halls — no windows at all — a practice that school officials once deemed unhealthy for kids, and many still do. A lot of older classrooms have ceilings, originally 10 to 12 feet high; more recently dropped to 8 1/2 or 9 feet to keep heating costs within reason.

Yet many new, 21st century buildings in West Michigan have returned to the 10 to 12 foot ceilings popular a century ago, and the hallways are often two-story atriums reminiscent of Medieval castles, as if the price of fuel was expected to remain constant for decades to come. Grand to behold, such expensive construction is costly to heat and maintain. By contrast, Coopersville High School's modern complex was built in 2002 with classroom ceilings a reasonable 8 2/3 feet high.

Possibly more telling, school construction is usually brick-faced cinder block, durable for at least a century. Yet taxpayers are often told that half-century old buildings are obsolete. Interesting, too, "obsolete" old school buildings are seldom razed. Most are renovated for continued use, either by industry (such as the Ram Electronics building on Third Avenue, Fruitport), or continued use by the school system as an alternative education facility; or even sold to a private school, such as Teen Challenge.

Superintendent Szymoniak seems like a sensible, down-to-earth guy, and I was impressed with his presentation to our Fruitport Township board. But superintendents come, and superintendents go, and we've not always been this fortunate. Whenever our school system hires a new leader — years down the road, we hope — we should consider: Does this guy have our kids' best interests in mind? Or is he/she interested in building an alabaster kingdom of grand edifices where his name is graven on a brass plaque?•