

Needed: New Opportunities and Directions for the School District
By Johnny Winston, Jr.

On May 24th, the Madison School Board participated in the democratic process by involving local citizens in its budgetary process by putting forth a referendum. Regardless of how you voted, I thank you for taking the time to listen to the issues, weigh in on the debate and cast your ballot the way you saw fit.

I am not surprised at the outcome of the referenda votes. While I voted, Yes, Yes, Yes, and encouraged others to do the same, I can understand why someone voted No, No, No or any other combination. I am sympathetic to community concerns regarding higher property taxes and the uneasiness that leaves in the community's sense of economic security. While I am disappointed in the outcome of the referenda for the district's operating budget and building a new school at Leopold elementary, I do believe that these defeats allow for exploring creative opportunities to capitalize on in the future.

To capitalize such opportunities I believe that the board should revisit and change some of its policies, like those regarding business partnerships for instance. While I am not advocating advertising during the school day or privatizing schools, the fiscal reality that the district is in necessitates that viable options for funding educational activities be considered. I believe strongly that the district could bring in additional revenue that could be used to operate extracurricular activities that are most at-risk for future budget reductions.

The enrollment concerns at Leopold elementary school need further exploration as well. Many may question the proposal to build a new school while there are several schools currently under enrolled. However, these schools are located on opposite sides of town, which do not lend themselves easily to transferring young children long distances to disperse uneven enrollments. The vote not to build a new school on the current Leopold site only delays inevitable decisions that will eventually also have to be made for Madison's far west and far east sides given the growth of housing developments. Most immediately, we will have to reconsider closing schools on Madison's north side and the isthmus. The school board will have to make these difficult decisions as growth dictates and perhaps even sooner as the financial challenges warrant. We also will have to reconsider boundary change options.

To assist with these financial challenges, the district should also look to models of successful private and public partnerships such as the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the City of Madison. These successful partnerships have resulted in the first-rate athletic arena and newly approved public pool facilitated by Senator Herb Kohl and the Goodman brothers, respectively. In looking for partnerships, we should revisit Promega's offer for the acquisition of free land they were prepared to give the school district for a middle school in the late 80's and early 90's. Rather than choosing the politically correct "person of color" after which to name a new school, why not look for an individual in the community who would like to make a sizable contribution to the district with naming rights? Politically correct is one thing, economically correct is another.

The Board should inform and consult the community in finding solutions to the difficult and complex fiscal crisis of the school district. The solution is not to pursue a “do over” by going to referendum again in November. This situation needs much further study; exploration and the development of more options. Not to do this in my humble opinion would be a mistake.

As a Board member, my role is to represent the concerns of the people and to ensure that the Madison school district is accountable to them and to the students who rely on us to make good, sound policy to facilitate their successful education. The results of the referendum underscore the need for creating alternatives and seizing opportunities to solve long-standing, complex issues.