

# Pottstown Pennsylvania

small town big dreams

## Civic group wins grant to protect school

### Rupert Elementary School declared eligible for National Register of Historic Places

Preservation Pottstown has received a \$6,000 grant from the Clanel Foundation to encourage the preservation of Rupert Elementary School.

Since its construction in 1927, Rupert School has been the anchor of the southeastern section of Pottstown. The all-masonry, fireproof building is constructed in the distinctive "Collegiate Gothic" style. In an advisory opinion issued last fall, the Pennsylvania Bureau for Historic Preservation determined that the building is worthy of inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1997, when the Pottstown School District considered demolishing the building, Preservation Pottstown gathered more than 500 signatures for a petition to the Pottstown School Board to save the school.

Meanwhile, the Pottstown Historical Society hired Dr. Yale Strzelus, the head of the school construction program for the state of Maryland, to examine the school. In a written report

to the Pottstown School Board, Dr. Strzelus declared that Rupert was worthy of preservation and renovation.

"Now the Rupert School is under threat of demolition once again," said George Wausnock, president of Preservation Pottstown. "We intend to do everything possible, working with the citizens of Pottstown, to save the school."

Wausnock said the recent renovation and expansion of the Pottstown Middle School shows how important the preservation of Pottstown's historic schools can be to the community's image. "No other district in the region has schools that can match the quality and character of the Pottstown Middle School and the Rupert School. We must look on these unique assets rather than throw them away."

Last year, the Pottstown School District hired Gilbert Associates of Lancaster to conduct a survey of all Pottstown elementary schools. The survey is to determine any renovations or new construction needed at Pottstown's



five elementary schools. Some school board members and administrators have suggested Rupert may need to be replaced. The possibility of abandoning Pottstown's system of neighborhood schools has also been raised.

"We think that would be a disaster for Pottstown," Wausnock said. "Our children have been able to walk to school for generations. We need to be sure that way."

Wausnock noted that the Pottstown Planning Commission also voted

unanimously to urge the school district to retain Rupert School as a vital community asset.

If necessary, Preservation Pottstown will again hire Dr. Strzelus of Maryland as a consultant to review any recommendation to close Rupert as an elementary school.

"Maryland's philosophy is to save existing schools whenever possible, because they are so important to the fabric of the community," Wausnock said. "We want that philosophy to be

voiced in Pottstown as well."

The civic group may also hire an architect experienced in historic preservation to review the evaluation of Pottstown's schools by Gilbert Associates.

"We want to make sure that an architect sympathetic to saving the school has an opportunity to review the evaluation. The people of Pottstown deserve to hear all the facts, not just one side of the issue," Wausnock said.

## New elementary school sought for downtown Historic district needs neighborhood school

The Pottstown School District has a once-a-lifetime opportunity to attract young middle class families to Pottstown.

The district has hired a Lancaster architectural firm to study the district's five neighborhood elementary schools to see what renovations, additions, or replacements might be needed to ensure Pottstown's facilities are first-rate.

Before looking at existing schools, however, Preservation Pottstown believes the district should first consider the need for a new

school to serve central Pottstown.

Pottstown's most historic homes are located in the Old Pottstown Historic District, which is north of High Street between Manatway and Charlotte streets. For decades, children in this area attended the Washington Elementary School, located at the site of the current administration building.

The Washington School was closed about 1970, and since then these students have been bused to the Barth

Elementary School in the west end of Pottstown.

The decision by the school district to bus these students to a school across a major highway and adjacent to a public housing project has had a powerful negative impact on residential real estate values in the downtown area. Many middle class families are reluctant to buy homes in this area when they learn there is no neighborhood elementary school.

A major attraction to families in the neighborhood is its walkability. Kids can walk to the park, and they can walk to their friends' houses. But they cannot walk to school. Remember, this neighborhood has among the finest old homes in Pottstown—spacious brick buildings that

*Should school district use Irene Boyer home for new offices? See other side*

could not be duplicated today. This is a major asset Pottstown has that the suburbs cannot match. But if Pottstown cannot market these homes to middle class families with young children, it cannot revitalize itself.

Meanwhile, a preliminary building report on Pottstown's elementary schools several years ago concluded that many if not all the schools would need to be expanded.

### Advantages of a new school

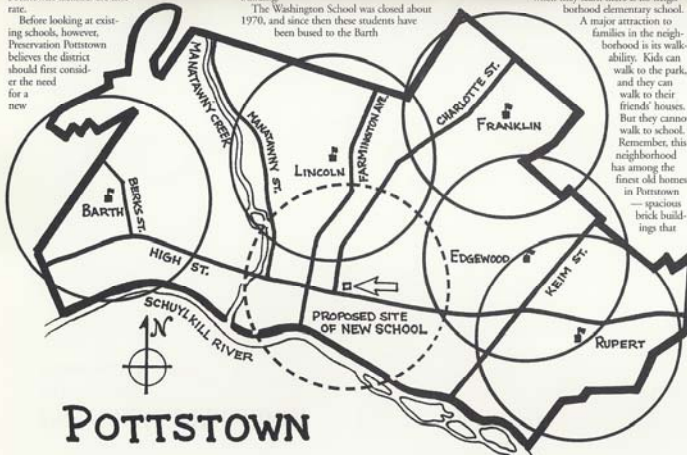
Before Pottstown takes that step, we believe the school district should consider a new school. A new school would offer the following advantages:

- With a new school in central Pottstown, nearly all elementary school children would be able to walk. In addition to children in the Historic District, it might be possible for children south of High Street between Hanover Street and the library to walk to the new school, rather than be bused to Edgewood.

- A new school would provide a tremendous shot in the arm to central Pottstown, making it a more attractive place to live. It would instill more pride and confidence in the downtown, just as the new borough hall has done.

- In the short term, a new school could be used to house students in the other schools during the time they are being renovated. For example, the first year, it could house Lincoln School students while that school was being renovated; the second

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POTTSTOWN

# Preservation Pottstown

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PRESERVATION POTTSTOWN is a not-for-profit civic organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing the quality of life in Pottstown. We are proud that Pottstown has residents of all ages, races, and incomes. We believe Pottstown has the potential to be one of the most attractive small towns in America. For questions or comments, please write or call: GEORGE WAUSNOCK, President, 1304 E. High Street, Pottstown, PA 19464, 323-8500 or THOMAS HYLTON, Vice President, 222 Chestnut Street, Pottstown, PA 19464, 323-6837.

## New elementary school sought for downtown Pottstown

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year it would house students at Franklin School; the third year, Rupert School; and so on until all the schools are renovated. Then the new school would become a neighborhood school for central Pottstown.

\* A new school would mean, no other elementary school in Pottstown would need to be expanded. Numerous studies have shown that students do better in small schools that provide a family-like atmosphere.

### Location of new school

Where would a new school be located? There are two obvious choices:

The school district could move its administrative offices to a new location, either in one of the many vacant buildings or lots downtown, or at the former King's Daughters Home (Irene Boyer home) across from Franklin Elementary School. The district administration building could then be converted into an elementary school.

Or, the district could build a new school on the borough-owned parking lot at High and Evans Streets. This lot, together with the adjacent Summit Court parking lot, would provide ample room for a new school and playground. The borough could "swap" its old borough hall parking lot for the Summit Court lot.

Parking could be provided on site or at the nearby borough parking lot on High Street just east of Evans Street.

Building a new elementary school on High Street would have the additional benefit of showing a new investment at a place where the most people would see it.

### Focusing on common goals

If Pottstown is to succeed, our elected officials and private civic leaders must agree on common goals and work together to make them happen. Better school facilities for our children are important, but we should also ensure these investments are part of a larger plan to improve the image of Pottstown and its quality of life for everyone.



## Group home or administration building?

The Northstar Property Co. has proposed converting the 7,500 square foot Irene Boyer Home, on Franklin Street directly across from the Franklin Elementary School, into a home for 36 disadvantaged girls.

Preservation Pottstown believes the building would better serve the community as a new school district administration building.

Every community has a responsibility to accommodate its fair share of disadvantaged citizens. However, Pottstown is already taking care of far more than its fair share.

Although Pottstown has just 3 percent of Montgomery County's population, it contains:

- 60 percent of the county's public housing for families.
- 52 percent of its public housing for the elderly.
- 14 percent of its subsidized Section 8 private housing units.
- The region's welfare office and county health center for low income families.
- Several clinics for the mentally ill.
- A group home for disadvantaged girls.
- A group home for disadvantaged boys.
- A Salvation Army homeless shelter for a dozen families.
- A residential drug rehabilitation center.
- Numerous other social service facilities for the poor and troubled. The Pottstown School District has:
  - Far more low income students than any other school district in the region. About 45 percent of Pottstown students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch.
  - A skyrocketing number of special education students, who are far more costly to educate than other students. About 16 percent of

Pottstown students are enrolled in special education classes, nearly double the percentage of 10 years ago. It costs the district nearly twice as much to educate special education students, per pupil, as other students.

It costs the Pottstown School District \$8,500 to educate one student per year. Therefore, the added cost of 36 more students per year is \$306,000. This assumes that none of the new students will be in special education.

On average, about one in six Pottstown students are in special education, which costs \$15,000 per year per student. Therefore, if these students are similar to the existing student population in Pottstown, the cost would be \$345,000 per year.

Northstar has the building under an agreement of sale for \$400,000. Presumably, that is the building's fair market value. Therefore, the cost to the district to obtain the building is not much more than the cost of educating 36 students for one year.

The school district needs to renovate its district administration building. Why not renovate the Irene Boyer Home for school district use? Certainly, the building is one of the most handsome in Pottstown, and there is room on site for parking and expansion of the building.

If the district acquires the building for administrative offices, it would provide another major benefit to the community.

The existing administration building could then be converted into a neighborhood elementary school for people living in central Pottstown, the location of Pottstown's most historic homes. A neighborhood school would make it much easier to attract middle class families with children to the downtown area.

## Contact your school board member

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