

# Op-Ed: Our school, our values

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By Jon Anderson

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I've been tossing and turning a lot at night. The K-8 Strategic School Solution on the ballot this November is really weighing on me. I'm worried about it passing and what it means for our community and youngest residents if it doesn't. I've been involved with the Building Committee for the past two years and have a deep understanding of the issues that face our school facilities. Our teachers and staff have been doing an excellent job educating our students at the K-2 and Middle School, despite inadequate and aging facilities that have put the safety and educational programming needs of our students at risk for over a decade. The students and our community deserve better. As Councilor Caterina says "If not now, when?"

As council liaison for the School Building Committee, I've experienced first hand the dedication of our residents, teachers, school staff, elected officials and experts as they worked tirelessly to find the best solution for our students that promotes educational excellence at an affordable cost to our community. Their hard work and commitment to our town and our students is truly inspiring and I'm convinced the K-8 Strategic Solution on the ballot this November is in the best interest of our community. That doesn't mean it's perfect, and it doesn't mean I expect everyone to support it. But I do hope everyone takes the time to understand the recommendation. Q&A sessions are open to the public every Tuesday at 6 p.m. at Town Hall for you to learn about the responsible and cost effective solution that will continue our community's pursuit for educational excellence.

Big decisions like this one are never easy and straightforward. I always try to focus on our shared community values to guide my decisions as a councilor. As I've learned, every big decision has consequences, and at times those consequences put our values at odds with one another. But a decision still has to be made. In the case of this school, the committee's objective was to identify the most financially responsible long-term decision that provides the safest learning environment for our students for decades to come. The price tag is not small, but that is mostly due to the cost of delays. If the same solution came forward pre-COVID, it would be significantly less. However, even at the cost of \$160 million, our taxes are only projected to increase an average of 3.7% annually in the first 10 years of bonding, compared to the council annual goal of "close to 3%." This is still a conservative estimate and the council can make additional choices to bring it down further. Like many, I'd love to keep our existing schools, but as the committee studied it's just not feasible or economically practical,

costing \$230M more in the next 30 years than the proposed K-8 strategic solution. If the solution passes, I'm committed to ensure the existing K-2 sites can be repurposed to support our community values.

I spent eight months at the negotiating table with The Down's to define the option agreement that will allow us to purchase land for the school site. Both the town and The Down's came forward in good faith to work on a compromise solution. The Down's was hesitant to provide the town 22 acres of tax exempt land, and we were only willing to pay fair market value identified by an independent appraiser. The option agreement is a compromise, and ultimately it's a compromise that is good for Scarborough. Unfortunately, many of the conversations I have with individuals who don't support the solution eventually show their anger towards The Down's. The Down's is a lightning rod for change and that leads to fear, which leads to anger. Some people and political action committees take advantage of that and use it as an opportunity to divide and create turmoil that diminishes the spirit of our community. Instead of focusing on the dislike of a business, let's focus on how we can improve the safety, well being and education of our youngest residents with a practical and reasonable solution. Things will only be more expensive if we don't act now, and continuing to triage will be costly and not in the best interests of our children or our community.

The decision this November is ultimately about what each of us value. I hope everyone will take the time to learn about the K-8 Strategic School solution and the impact it will have for our community and our youngest residents. I read this Native American parable recently that really resonated with me. I think it represents what many of us may be grappling with as we make our choice this November:

An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil — he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good — he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you — and inside every other person, too." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

I know which wolf I'm going to feed.

*The thoughts and opinions expressed in this article are mine alone and do not reflect the position of the Scarborough Town Council.*

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