

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Rebuilding Center School

It is a tendency of mine to look at the public issues of the day in their historical context. One of my favorite Longmeadow stories, told to me by an old timer, concerns the ceremonies that opened the Longmeadow Junior High School, now Center Annex, in 1921. Before the official ribbon cutting, the building suffered a power failure and the lights went out. Not to be thwarted, Longmeadow citizens arranged their motorcars on the lawn so the headlamps shone through the glass front of the gymnasium to illuminate the celebration. Such innovation has been part of the school's ongoing experience for my 25 years in town. It continues today with the renovation project.

Longmeadow parents and officials have struggled to find the means of converting Center to an appropriate school setting for the 21st century. If school enrollment had fallen as projected, it might have been closed by now. If preschool and full day kindergarten were not priorities, it might not be needed in the future. But today's realities make Center a necessary component in the town's educational system. Town meeting and referendum votes have authorized Longmeadow to proceed in a building project to create a new educational setting at Center School. The project has been approved for state assistance through the School Building Assistance Bureau (SBAB). But there is one more glitch.

Last month, after all of our local progress, came a setback beyond control of the town. Gov. Weld proposed a budget that funds only a fraction of the SBAB projects that have been approved. Of the \$9 million needed to extend funding to Longmeadow's project, only \$3.8 million is authorized. That is bad news, but it is not the end of the project. I have already begun work to restore that funding as the House of Representatives reworks the budget document.

The House is developing a budget that builds on the governor's document but is not limited by it. As a member of the Ways and Means Committee, I will participate in that process, and you may be assured that I will work to increase school assistance monies. Our schools throughout Massachusetts are entering a period of growth after the enrollment declines of the '80s, and the state has an obligation to assist in providing for tomorrow's graduates. A natural coalition of legislators from all impacted school districts will join with me to support the appropriation for our schools. During the budget development process our committee will hold hearings throughout the state, and Center parents may attend to testify on behalf of the school's need.

My support for Center School comes from several directions. As a parent, I have experienced the antiquated facility; as a school committee member I have worked to update the facility; as a legislator I accept the responsibility to assist in improving conditions for Longmeadow and for the other communities of the state. Our town can continue that tradition of 1921 when we work together to provide for our children and, metaphorically, shine our headlights on Center School.