

A Plan Worth a Hearing

David Paterno and a team of volunteers have proposed what they are calling "The Sensible Solution," an alternative to the State College Area School District's \$97 million, single-building, high school renovation plan. Its debate-slanting title aside, the proposal deserves full consideration by the school board and administration.

Paterno is blessed with a name that opens doors. Unfortunately, he walked through one of those doors last May and presented to district officials a letter from the dissident group State High Vision threatening legal action over the community-dividing facility-upgrade plan.

Paterno's previous involvement notwithstanding -- he said at the time he was not a member of State High Vision -- the current proposal arose out of his commendable desire to bridge the ever-widening gap between the two sides and foster consensus.

Bridge is an appropriate term here inasmuch as "The Sensible Solution" -- the proposal's title, not necessarily our editorial judgment -- features an elevated, enclosed pedestrian walkway connecting a renovated High School South Building with its renovated northerly counterpart.

The sigh of exasperation you may be hearing is, no doubt, coming from school board members, administration and staff who are probably muttering under their collective breath -- or screaming out loud -- "We've been through this. We already considered that configuration -- and rejected it. It's time to move on."

We maintain that it is time to reconsider it -- fully and fairly -- for a number of reasons: 35 million, to be exact. That's how many dollars Paterno's proposal -- developed with the help of architects, education specialists and financial experts -- could save over the board's current one-building plan.

That savings -- almost five times the cost of the just-completed renovations to the Marion-Walker Elementary School in the Bellefonte Area School District -- would go a long way toward paying for the renovations needed at the other buildings in the State College district.

It is a significant amount of money -- so much so that it should not be dismissed with a "we've already considered it," or "the project is too far along to change."

Just as importantly -- and with possibly an equal or greater financial impact in the future -- the Paterno model, with both buildings undergoing renovations and expansion, offers flexibility, much more so than one large building on the north side of the parkway.

The no-appreciable-growth-in-enrollment projection on which the current plan is based is, frankly, far from persuasive. Interstate 99, Penn State's law school and dozens of other factors make putting all of one's eggs in a single basket -- or all of one's students in a single building with little or no room for additional expansion -- seem risky in the extreme.

The two-buildings-with-a-bridge proposal deserves a full hearing -- at the very least during a work session devoted to it, not just as one agenda item among many during a busy board meeting -- for another important reason. The question of whether a small school or a large school offers a better learning environment and how that should relate to the State High project has yet to be decided, at least to the public's satisfaction.

The school board's heretofore-expressed justification for one large high school is anecdotal -- a nebulous desire to foster a sense of community. That may be an important goal, and it may be worth an additional \$35 million to realize.

And while the board is responsible for the final decision, as Paterno, to his credit, has expressed, and board members insist they have already made that decision -- unanimously -- this is a proposal that deserves serious consideration. It may just prove to be, indeed, the sensible solution.