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From: Suzanne Sundburg

To: County Board of Arlington

CC: school.board@apsva.us, Patrick K. Murphy, Ed.D., Barbara Donnellan

Priority: High

April 9, 2015

Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd.
Arlington VA 22201

Dear Chair Hynes and County Board members,

On Saturday, you will vote on whether to approve the demolition of the historic Wilson School, the last historic structure of great value still standing in the Rosslyn area. Though I understand the County Board's reluctance to go against the School Board's wishes, the Wilson School is an irreplaceable part of the county's past.

There seems to be an inherent bias against older buildings in Arlington, with staff and elected officials viewing them as somehow inferior due to their age. In reality, however, the craftsmanship and materials used to construct older buildings are often far superior to those used in modern construction. A properly renovated historic building, irrespective of its original construction date, can easily last as long if not longer than a new building.

In addition to preserving an important link to our past, there are three other reasons to rehabilitate and reuse older school buildings. The first is the **financial advantage**. Over the long term, rehabilitating older buildings is more cost-efficient. Second, there are clear sustainability and **environmental benefits** in rehabilitating older structures rather than demolishing them. And third, there is documented evidence supporting the **economic development value** of retaining historic buildings.

Financial Advantages

State and federal tax credits are available to defray the cost of rehabilitating historic buildings like the Wilson School. Though there are some requirements that must be met, it is essentially free money. In the state of Virginia, the abandoned Maggie Walker High School (c. 1937) was transformed into the Virginia Governor's School by the firm of Sadler and Whitehead, which also preserved Petersburg High School, using a combination of tax credits and private investment.[1]

In her 2011 doctoral dissertation, VCU doctoral candidate Paola Venturini Brooks concludes, "Findings are that the historic rehabilitation programs provide tax incentive of up to 20% for the federal program and 25% for the Virginia tax credit program, for a *combined tax incentive of up to 45% of the rehabilitation expenditures.*"[2]

Yes, that's right, **tax credits can cover up to 45% of rehabilitation expenditures.**

So why would APS leave that kind of money sitting on the table? The National Trust for Historic Preservation explains it this way:

Many school districts hire architect/planning consultants early on to perform school facility evaluations for all the schools in the district. Such evaluations are used to determine the broad outlines of need and may be conducted by professionals lacking experience with renovation possibilities.

Evaluators without renovation experience tend to emphasize deficiencies related to:

- Questionable structural integrity
- Codes and life safety
- Molds and the “sick building syndrome”
- Lead paint
- Asbestos
- Outdated technology
- Classroom size

While these are often of real concern, they can be overly dramatized by misguided evaluators as irreparable conditions, and then used to promote replacement as the only reasonable response to an irredeemable situation. It is possible to alter the initial judgment by evaluators with further study, and the final decision on whether or not to renovate lies with the local school board. Yet the first perception of a school documented in the initial evaluation tends to stick in the minds of school board members and the public. That can make it more difficult to later make a case for renovation.[3]

Even when historic tax credits are not utilized, renovation of existing school buildings can be much more economical. Brooks’s dissertation reviews four schools renovated without tax credits. One of those is Douglas S. Freeman High School in Henrico County (my alma mater). The main building was constructed in 1953 with approximately five subsequent additions. I can attest to the lack of air-conditioning, the decrepit heat system, drafty windows, etc., back in the late ‘70s. And yet, the building has been in continuous use ever since.

Despite the school’s age and condition, Henrico County deemed it cost-effective to rehabilitate the school, including the cost of replacing/adding HVAC, the electrical system and windows and installing an Internet backbone throughout the building. The total cost was \$26 million. In 2011, Stafford County officials toured Freeman and were so impressed with the renovation work that it decided to renovate (rather than raze) Stafford High, built in 1975. (See attachment.)

Rehabilitating older school buildings isn’t a rarity. In the 1960s, my husband’s elementary school in Massachusetts was already 100 years young (and still going strong). Today, it has been converted for use as senior housing. The truth is that most jurisdictions in this country simply do not have the luxury of squandering precious resources the way we do in Arlington.

*In *Renovate or Replace? The case for restoring and reusing older school buildings*, the Pennsylvania Department of Education states, “Experience has shown that it’s generally less expensive to renovate an existing school than to build a new one.”[4]*

Environmental Benefits

Though officials may question how “green” older buildings may be, a renovated older building can be a lot greener and more sustainable than a new one. A 2007 white paper drafted by Patrice Frey, discusses the “embodied” energy inherent in existing buildings. *Embodied energy* is defined as the

total energy required for the extraction, processing, manufacture and delivery of building materials to the building site. (It doesn't include the energy for operations or disposal of demolition materials.)

Frey remarks on researcher Mike Jackson's work and notes the following:

[T]he energy embodied in buildings is often viewed as insignificant by green building advocates. Over a typical building's life time, embodied energy amounts for approximately 16% of a building's total life cycle energy consumption; in contrast, 74% of energy use is attributed to building operations (see Figure 1). Thus, there is the common misperception that energy wasted in building demolition and reconstruction is quickly recovered in building operations.

However, through a series of calculations, Jackson demonstrates that new buildings' life span must reach 26 years to save more energy than the continued use of an existing building. As building energy efficiency increases, embodied energy consumes an even larger proportion of life cycle energy consumption. Jackson finds that **if a building were demolished and partially salvaged and replaced with a new energy efficient building, it would take 65 years to recover the energy lost in demolishing a building and reconstructing a new structure in its place.** That is longer than many modern buildings survive.[5]

Though new green buildings may consume less energy over time, there is still a significant cost with respect to the consumption of materials and the disposal of demolition and construction waste of the razed building. Below are statistics found on the U.S. Green Building Council's website:

Buildings use 40% of raw materials globally (3 billion tons annually).

The EPA estimates that 170 Million tons of building-related construction and demolition (C&D) debris was generated in the U.S. in 2003, with 61% coming from nonresidential and 39% from residential sources. They also estimate that 250 million tons of municipal solid waste was generated in the U.S. in a single year.[6]

So construction and demolition waste represents over half of all municipal solid waste generated in the United States. The Trust for Historic Preservation notes that "every square foot of nonresidential building demolition adds 155 pounds of solid waste to area landfills. In contrast, non-residential renovation only produced 18 pounds of waste per square foot." [7]

Economic Development Value

Because we are all about economic development these days, we can't overlook the economic development value generated by historic preservation and tax credits. In 2014, Preservation Virginia calculated the direct, indirect and induced economic impact of the historic rehabilitation tax credit program for the Northern Virginia MSA. Though Northern Virginia had a large number of projects (269), it spent a relatively modest sum in qualified rehabilitation expenditures. Of that nearly \$120 million spent, Preservation Virginia calculated an economic impact of \$146.1 million to the Northern Virginia MSA.[8]

A 2005 Brookings Institution discussion paper analyzes the economics of historic preservation and makes the following observation:

By most accounts, it is more efficient and profitable to preserve a historic building than to construct a new one. Designating a landmark or district as historical typically maintains if not boosts the value of the property, and as an economic development tool, historic preservation has proved its worth. Nearly any way the effects are measured, be they direct or indirect, historic

preservation tends to yield significant benefits to the economy.[9]

In summary, the arguments in favor of historic preservation go well beyond preserving a remaining vestige of Arlington's rapidly vanishing history—as important as that may be. At a time when every dollar counts, if the County Board chooses demolition over preservation, it will be foregoing federal and state tax credits that could be leveraged to renovate the Wilson School. Floating bonds for a brand new school will reduce the overall bond capacity available for other projects.

And in choosing to raze the Wilson School, the Board will also be ignoring the significant environmental impacts associated with demolition and construction. The county also will lose any economic development bump associated with the preservation of an important piece of Arlington's history.

Finally, the Rosslyn area is already about as barren and sterile as a neighborhood can get. Retaining a small bit of Arlington's history would provide some welcome visual relief from an otherwise desolate landscape of endless high-rise buildings. I ask that you agree to the designation of the Wilson School property as historic, particularly now that the HALRB has twice voted to support this designation.

Sincerely,

Suzanne Smith Sundburg
5300 8th Road North
Arlington VA

Sources:

[1] Saddler & Whitehead, Maggie Walker School,

<http://www.sadlerandwhitehead.com/maggiwalkerhigh.html>

[2] "Use Of Historic Tax Credits For School Construction In Virginia: Costs, Benefits, Administrative Implications, And Public Policy Issues," Brooks, 2011,

<http://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3609&context=etd>

[3] Trust for Historic Preservation, "Older and Historic Schools: A Roadmap for Saving Your School,"

http://www.preservationnation.org/information-center/saving-a-place/historic-schools/resources-for-advocates-and-policy-makers/school_study_roadmap.pdf

[4] PA Dept. of Education & PA School Boards Association, *Renovate or Replace? The case for restoring and reusing older school buildings*,

<http://www.saveourlandsaveourtowns.org/pdfs/RenovateorReplace/RoRMMASTER.pdf>

[5] Making the Case: Historic Preservation as Sustainable Development

[6] U.S. Green Building Council, "Green Building Facts," <http://www.usgbc.org/articles/green-building-facts>

[7] Trust for Historic Preservation, "Older and Historic Schools: A Roadmap for Saving Your School,"

http://www.preservationnation.org/information-center/saving-a-place/historic-schools/resources-for-advocates-and-policy-makers/school_study_roadmap.pdf; see also the demolition waste

calculator at <http://www.thegreenestbuilding.org/waste.html>

[8] Preservation Virginia, *Economic Impact of Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit Programs in Virginia*, 2014, [http://preservationvirginia.org/docs/VCU_Historic_Tax_Credit_Report_FINAL_21-1-](http://preservationvirginia.org/docs/VCU_Historic_Tax_Credit_Report_FINAL_21-1-2014smallpdf.com.pdf)

[2014smallpdf.com.pdf](http://preservationvirginia.org/docs/VCU_Historic_Tax_Credit_Report_FINAL_21-1-2014smallpdf.com.pdf)

[9] Brookings Institution, "Economics And Historic Preservation: A Guide And Review Of The Literature," Randall Mason, 2005,
http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2005/9/metropolitanpolicy-mason/20050926_preservation.pdf