

COMMENTARY

FRANKLIN HIGH REBUILD

The proper process for Portland school projects

**EDWARD WOLF,
JOE PURKEY and
SCOTT BAILEY**
IN OUR OPINION

Our organization, Community & Parents for Public Schools, is part of a national group

dedicated to community and parent engagement in all aspects of public education. For us, community members who step forward to help shape school district policies play an indispensable role in improving public education.

We've made it a priority to serve on Portland Public Schools committees (boundary review, budget review, facilities planning) as volunteers, and most of us were deeply involved in the successful campaign to pass the \$482 million PPS bond in 2012. We have watched the bond projects at Roosevelt and Franklin high schools move steadily, if bumpily, toward groundbreaking, and we have monitored the design advisory process.

Thus it was with concern that we read Steve Duin's recent column about the "value engineering" needed to keep the Franklin High School project on budget ("Cutting the new Franklin High down to size," April 15) and his complaint that the process used to identify \$20 million in savings was a disservice to community members who had assisted the design.

Franklin's citizen Design Advisory Group met 10 times between June 2013 and October 2014, and project budgets were not a major topic during those meetings. The group's charter does not extend to review of project costs or spending plans. But it's natural to expect that a group of people who have spent nearly 18 months shaping design priorities might feel a stake in the cuts needed to keep the design on budget.

Value engineering – finding ways to cut construction costs while preserving the integrity of the project – is a necessary step in any large construction project, particularly renovations of historic buildings. Every one of the construction experts (also volunteers) who make up the PPS Bond Accountability Committee affirmed this when they met this month. The Roosevelt and Franklin bond

projects are big and complex, the Portland construction sector is booming (making both labor and materials more costly), and \$482 million is all the money that Portland voters approved for this program. Attractive designs developed to meet a plethora of needs and wants have to be built out in affordable reality.

Although we think that bond projects will be strongest with more, rather than less, community engagement, how neighbors and parents should be involved in value engineering strikes us as a tricky question. The details at this stage (prices, quantities, labor rates, etc.) are vast and intricate, and working through them requires weeks of professionals' time. Bringing community members up to speed on these details could be a real challenge.

The Franklin design team has set what we consider a promising course by sharing a list of "bid alternate" projects with Franklin's Parent Teacher Student Association and Design Advisory Group and inviting input on priorities. If the general contractor realizes savings or funds can be reassigned from elsewhere in the bond program, then some project features cut in the value engineering process could be added back to Franklin without resorting to the "cheerleader car washes" that Duin decries. Asking the community for input on alternatives strikes us as a responsible way to begin the process. We encourage the district to make it regular practice when project costs must be reined in.

Community and parent engagement is the bedrock of public education. Both the school district and the public need to show flexibility for engagement to work well. Good process may not relieve the disappointment when anticipated plans prove unaffordable, but better process can give people confidence that their children and their tax money are in responsible hands and building a durable future.

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Edward Wolf, Joe Purkey, and Scott Bailey are board members of Community & Parents for Public Schools, a Portland nonprofit organization.