

Support for Catholic high school gains momentum in Hilltown area

Joe Ferry

Until three weeks ago, Susanne and Tim Petrosky of Hilltown didn't give much thought to their three kids' high school education. With the oldest just ready to start third grade, it will be another five or six years before they have to make that decision.

But when rumors surfaced recently that the Archdiocese of Philadelphia is considering building a new state-of-the-art high school less than a mile from their home on Endslow Lane, the Petroskys found themselves organizing a grass-roots effort to make it happen.

With Susanne, a stay-at-home mom, writing the copy and Tim, a self-employed technology professional, doing the design work, the couple have launched a web site (www.bulldoorschoolhighschool.com) to gather support for the project.

The next step is getting lawn signs made.

"It has taken on a life of its own," said Susanne Petrosky.

The key, she said, will be letting archdiocesan officials know there is strong sentiment among families in the area for building the new high school, which would replace Lansdale

Catholic. Situated in a residential portion of the borough, the school has about reached its capacity with 806 students during the past academic year.

Last week, the archdiocese sent a survey to families who live within a 10-mile radius of the site of the proposed school and have children between the third and sixth grades at Catholic elementary schools or enrolled in religious-education programs in their parishes.

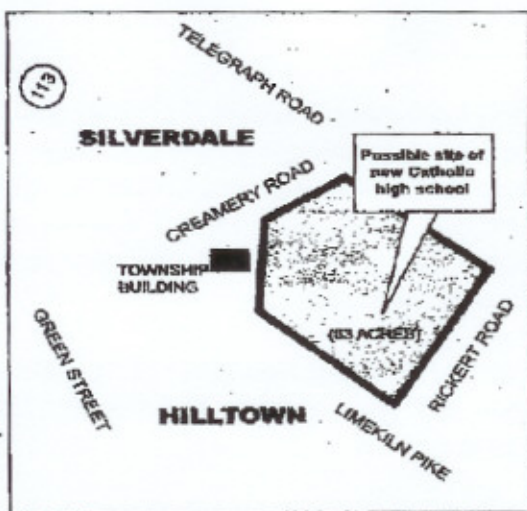
The survey aims to find out

whether parents would send their children to new schools and whether they would be willing to pay a premium for state-of-the-art facilities. For the upcoming academic year, high school tuition is \$4,380 for Catholics and \$5,320 for non-Catholics.

Susanne Petrosky said the answer is a resounding yes. In fact, she said, some non-Catholic friends and neighbors have said they would send their children to a new Catholic high school.

Petrosky, whose three children attend St. Agnes/Sacred Heart School, said it is important to balance the desire for a faith-based education with the reality of preparing youngsters to enter the college or the workforce with the practical skills they need to prosper. Without a new high school, Petrosky said she's not certain her kids would go to the existing Lansdale Catholic, which lacks some amenities of modern high schools.

"As much as I want them to go to Catholic schools I have an obligation as a parent to provide them with the best education before they go to college," she said.



Map by CHRISTINE BAAL

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The proposed site for the new school is a 63-acre property bounded by Route 152, West Creamery Road and Rickert Road, which the archdiocese bought in 2001. Preliminary plans call for a state-of-the-art school that would house 1,200

students and include wireless classrooms, science and technology labs, auditoriums with full theaters, multipurpose athletic fields with tracks, and ample parking.

The questionnaire is the first step toward a more in-depth study that would examine the

feasibility of new buildings, according to the archdiocese, and include a "thorough analysis of regional population trends and enrollment projections," according to a news release from the archdiocese.

"We don't know, first of all, do our people want this," said Bishop Joseph McFadden, who oversees religious education in the archdiocese. "We need solid statistics."

Funding could be an issue. The archdiocese has not opened a new high school since spending \$36 million to build Bishop Shanahan in Downingtown in 1998.

"Having the sites is one thing, but having the money to build is another," McFadden said. "Right now the diocese does not have the money for that."

Response to the website has been swift, said Susanne Petrosky. Within several hours of sending 500 emails, the web site already had dozens of hits, she said.

The archdiocese expects to complete a review of the survey

findings by early fall and make a recommendation to Cardinal Justin Rigali early next year. Bishop McFadden stressing that the study is being done to relocate schools, not close them, said a decision to move ahead will occur only if survey results reflect positive interest and support for the schools.

"We have established the groundwork of our study by analyzing the enrollment projections for our proposed schools and the growth of the communities that will surround them," said Bishop McFadden. "However, the single most important element to the continuation of this feasibility study is the willingness of area parents to support this exciting initiative. Without their enthusiasm and interest, we will not move forward."

Meanwhile, Petrosky is slightly overwhelmed by her role as a community activist.

"I'm just a stay at home mom, doing lunch duty and going to Gymboree," she said. "But this is an important cause."



Susanne Petrosky of Hilltown with her son Kieran, 5, and daughter Tara, 7.