

Archdiocese still evaluating Lansdale Catholic move

By HILARY BENTMAN
The Intelligencer

A year after a survey showed support for moving [Lansdale Catholic High School](#) to [Hilltown](#), there has still been no word on if or when it will happen.

The [Archdiocese of Philadelphia](#) continues to explore the financial feasibility of a new school.

Original estimates showed it could cost about \$45 million to build a new Lansdale Catholic on a 63-acre property at Route 152, West Creamery and Rickert roads in Hilltown. But that figure is already a few years old.

“Anytime time goes by, it usually gets more expensive,” said archdiocese spokeswoman Donna Farrell.

Although no formal announcements have been made, there has been some movement. Site survey work was performed on the Hilltown property over the summer, said Joanne McHugh, a Lansdale Catholic graduate and a member of the school's strategic planning committee.

The archdiocese has owned the land since 2001, buying it for \$1.7 million.

“A lot of progress was made in terms of site planning that you need to do,” said McHugh. “Obviously there has been no official announcement. But I'm very optimistic about it. We're hoping for the best.”

If a new school gets the green light it could take four to five years to construct. The current Lansdale Catholic would likely close.

The idea of moving the school has divided the community.

Opened in 1949, Lansdale Catholic moved to its current building in 1960. With more than 800 students, some argue the building is cramped and outdated, lacks the amenities of today's modern high schools, and cannot accommodate the growing Catholic population.

But there is another side that believes Lansdale Catholic should remain in Lansdale, where its tradition and history is based, and the current campus should be renovated.

In summer 2006, the question was posed to parents whose children attend area parishes or CCD religious education classes and live within a 10-mile radius of the Hilltown site. The idea was to see if those children, who would be high-schoolers by the time a new school opened, would attend.

Half of parents with children in [Catholic](#) school, who responded to the survey, told the archdiocese they would likely send their children to a school in Hilltown. When parents with children who only attend the after-school religious program were calculated into the mix, the support dropped to 32 percent. Another 25 percent were undecided.

George Di Domizio feels the survey results were less than convincing. He is part of Friends and Alumni of Lansdale Catholic, a vocal group that favors keeping the school in Lansdale and renovating the existing building.

Di Domizio argues that not only could a renovation be cheaper, the demographics do not support the need for a new building. The archdiocese has stated it would like to see 1,200 students enrolled at a new Lansdale Catholic in Hilltown. But Di Domizio says he's seen enrollment projections below 800.

“Build it and they will come is rather bravado,” he said. “It could happen. Miracles do happen. But more realistically, it is good stewardship to manage what we have in a more responsible way.”

Census studies indicate the Catholic population is moving out of the city and into the suburbs. According to archdiocesan reports, the number of registered Catholics in Bucks and Montgomery counties has been steadily rising. However, parish school enrollment has been dropping.

One exception is the cluster near Lansdale Catholic. Enrollment there has increased 8 percent between 2002 and 2006.

Preliminary concepts for a school in Hilltown include a 200,000-square-foot building, with science and technology labs, a library/media center, television studio, wireless classrooms, an art studio, auditorium and two gyms.

A drawing also shows athletic fields and what appears to be a stadium. The current school has no stadium and the Lansdale Crusaders football team plays home games at Wissahickon High School.

While no official announcement has been made, rumors continue to abound. One is over fundraising.

With the archdiocese celebrating its 200th anniversary this year, some speculate it would use the opportunity to launch a capital campaign to raise money for a new Lansdale Catholic and another high school being considered in the Royersford area.

Farrell said the archdiocese is looking into a major fundraiser for its bicentennial, but money raised could be used for all sorts of buildings and programs, including tuition assistance.

Hilary Bentman can be reached at (215) 538-6380 or hbentman@phillyBurbs.com.

November 1, 2007 6:59 AM