

## Lansdale Catholic continuing review of possible move to Hilltown

By Bob Keeler  
Staff writer

Ongoing architectural and site evaluations, coupled with financial and fundraising studies, will help decide whether Lansdale Catholic High School will move to Hilltown.

"Once these feasibility studies are completed, then the archdiocese will have a clearer picture of what's going to happen and the timeline," said Joanne McHugh, chairwoman of the Lansdale Catholic Advisory Board.

A 63-acre property on Route 152 between Creamery and Rickert roads is being considered for the move.

The current school in Lansdale is on a 33-acre property

"With a larger parcel, like the 63 acres in Hilltown, there's more room to do things," said McHugh.

More space is needed for both the school building and athletic fields, and will give room for additional enrollment and curriculum programs, she said. Enrollment at the school, which this year is 852, has increased in recent years, she said.

In November, the archdiocese announced the results of a survey of parents of children in third to sixth grades currently attending Catholic elementary schools or participating in religious education programs in their parish and living within 10 miles of the proposed Hilltown school or another one planned for Royersford. The survey was distributed to more than 10,000 parents; 2,854 responded.

"We're extremely encouraged by the results of this research," Bishop Joseph P. McFadden, who oversees the Office of Catholic Education, was quoted in a release announcing the results. "Our parents have spoken through this survey, indicating that support exists for these high schools. They have demonstrated an interest in enrolling their children, an enthusiasm for the importance of Catholic education within a state-of-the-art facility and a willingness to pay an increased tuition to provide their children with this educational experience."

Salford resident George DiDomizio, who, like McHugh, is a Lansdale Catholic graduate and was a member of the Lansdale Catholic Planning committee, which spent a year looking into the proposed Hilltown move, said some of the committee members reached a different conclusion.

"The reality of the data is that there is not overwhelming support of the parents in those grades for a new school in Hilltown," DiDomizio said. "We maintain that the survey was a disappointment."

For the Hilltown school, the survey showed that 50 percent of those surveyed with children now in Catholic elementary schools would most likely send their child to the new high school, with 32 percent of parents with elementary-age children in parish religious education programs saying they were interested in having their child go to the new school.

About half the parents said they would be willing to pay

a tuition increase for the new school.

The new school would need to be able to attract at least 1,200 students to be viable, according to the archdiocese, which said in November the survey indicated enrollment would be at least that much

Moving the school to Hilltown would add busing from areas, including Quakertown and Palisades school districts, that now do not have busing to the Lansdale school, McHugh said.

"If we were to move the campus to Hilltown, we would kind of extend our geographic reach," she said.

Demographic studies show that more growth is coming in the Upper Bucks and Montgomery areas than in the area where the school now is located, McHugh said.

The population in those areas is less than in the North Penn area, though, DiDomizio said.

"The expectation that the archdiocese would gain students from Upper Bucks and retain the ones from Lansdale is unrealistic," DiDomizio said.

"It comes down to money and miles," said DiDomizio, who said he doesn't think the number of parents the archdiocese is expecting to send their children to the new school will do so.

The possibility of renovating and adding to the existing building was looked into, McHugh said.

"Really, it would be hard to offer all the things you could in a new facility," McHugh said, and the costs are not all that different."

That may be true if the renovations in Lansdale were to create a school that would be the same as at the proposed Hilltown school, but other are other options, DiDomizio said.

"The committee worked with a modest expansion and a modernization," DiDomizio said.

The estimated costs for that were \$15 million, compared with \$45 million for the new school, he said.

The survey didn't give parents a chance to vote on that possibility, though, he said.

"The only option given was a newer, bigger school in Hilltown," DiDomizio said.

The debate over whether the school should be moved has extended onto the Internet, where [www.lcalumni.com](http://www.lcalumni.com) has information and comments in favor of the school remaining in Lansdale while [www.buildourshghschool.com](http://www.buildourshghschool.com) supports the move.

An update on the proposed move was given recently to Lansdale Catholic faculty and staff.

DiDomizio, who was not at that meeting, said he was told that the target date given at the meeting for reaching a decision is in the next three to four months.

"We know that a lot of people are interested in what's happening with the school, and at this point, we just need to be patient and let the process proceed," McHugh said.