

The Reporter

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Lansdale Catholic's future uncertain

By mark d. marotta

Staff Writer

With still no public word from the Archdiocese of Philadelphia as to the possibility that Lansdale Catholic High School may relocate to Hilltown, two members of a planning committee formed to study the school's future options have circulated a report questioning the proposed move.

In August 2006, the archdiocese distributed a survey to area families seeking feedback on the idea of opening a high school in Hilltown, to replace the existing school in Lansdale.

The survey was accompanied by a proposal for a 200,000-square-foot building on 61 acres that the archdiocese owns at the corner of Rickert Road and Route 152.

An estimate at the time indicated that the school would cost \$45 million and would have a minimum enrollment of 1,200 students.

Donna Farrell, director of communications for the archdiocese, said in November 2006 that the complete survey results would not be made publicly available because they were proprietary. A press release from the archdiocese said that 50 percent of the respondents within 10 miles of Hilltown who had children in parish

elementary schools would choose to have them attend the new school.

Among parents with children in parish elementary schools or religious programs, 32 percent of those within 10 miles of Hilltown favored sending them to the new school.

In a recent e-mail, Farrell wrote that the archdiocese has not yet completed its analysis or "made a final decision on the potential relocation."

She added that the archdiocese is conducting an "an architectural evaluation and site planning process," and is also evaluating costs and funding alternatives.

Farrell wrote that the decision concerning the potential relocation "is much too important to make without ensuring that every analysis possible has been thoroughly completed."

She added, "Since a final decision has not been made to relocate Lansdale Catholic, any efforts to sell the property currently occupied by the school would be premature."

Farrell said the archdiocese formed the planning committee "as part of its ongoing

feasibility study of Lansdale Catholic's facilities."

She added that the group represented the Office of Catholic Education, administration and staff from the high school, community members, parents and alumni.

"Equally important to note," Farrell wrote, "this committee also intentionally includes those who have a dissenting point of view regarding moving Lansdale Catholic from its current site, as we remain committed to hearing and understanding all points of view on this important topic."

The "Special Report Prepared by Two Members of the Lansdale Catholic Planning Committee" was developed by George DiDomizio and Tom Francis this past August.

In a recent interview, Francis said the committee consisted of about 15 members. He added that the committee did not issue a majority report. The idea of the special report was to generate some kind of response, Francis said.

He added that the committee used the "Delphi process," which is designed to avoid peer pressure by having people fill out questionnaires developed and interpreted by an independent party. Francis said the committee did not achieve its goal of reaching an 80 percent level of consensus.

Farrell said the committee met from November 2005 through last December and "studied reams of demographic data and other information as they evaluated various options for the school moving forward."

According to Farrell, the planning committee's research showed an 11 percent rate of growth in the population of registered Catholics in upper Bucks County from 2002-06, compared to a 5 percent growth rate in northwestern Montgomery County.

She added that data from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission indicated that the areas to the north and west of Lansdale Catholic's present location were projected to continue to expand.

The text of the special report said that the planning committee members mostly assumed that the population served by Lansdale Catholic is growing and moving towards Hilltown.

But at the state level, the report said, the proportion of students in private and non-public schools has declined from 15.6 percent in 1996-97, to 13.3 percent in 2005-06. The report said that enrollment in parish grade schools in the Hilltown area is declining, while enrollment in parish schools in Lansdale have exceeded archdiocesan projections.

According to the special report, discussion at a May 2006 meeting of a subcommittee formed to develop detailed demographic data showed the assumption of a population

shift from the North Penn area to upper Bucks County was overstated.

“In conclusion, there is neither support nor justification for the construction of a new regional high school on the land presently owned by the Archdiocese on Route 152 in Hilltown and the subsequent closing of Lansdale Catholic. Rather, there is strong support and justification for the renovation and expansion of Lansdale Catholic at its present site,” the report said.

Among the reasons cited for keeping the high school in Lansdale, the report said renovation of the existing building would cost \$15 million, compared to the \$45 million estimated for the facility in Hilltown.

The report also said the school’s present location is served by a reasonably good road system, with convenient access to public transportation.

Traveling to Hilltown would pose “significant risks to student drivers,” the special report said.

According to Francis, the special report was submitted to about 20 archdiocesan officials around the time it was completed.

“We sent it downtown,” Francis said. He added that the report was submitted to about 20 archdiocesan officials around the time it was completed.

Francis said there had been some response from the archdiocesan auditors or accountants, describing the report as very complete.

“I don’t know what influence it had,” he added.

In her e-mail, Farrell said the report had been thoroughly read by the staff and administration of the archdiocese’s Office of Catholic Education.

“As we have not reached a final decision in this matter, we continue to be interested in all community dialogue and the diverse range of opinions that exist on the future of Lansdale Catholic,” she wrote.

According to Francis, the special report drew on information from the state Department of Education and the archdiocese about demographics and enrollment trends in area schools. He added that the special report showed that the numbers do not support moving the high school to Hilltown.

“We think the location we have is fine,” Francis said.



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Students exit Lansdale Catholic High School at the end of the school day.