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## **"A+B = Expensive"**

By Justin M. Kiska

Every election year you are guaranteed to hear at least one candidate say, "The children are our future." If you are anything like former State Delegate Anita Stup or me, you cringe when you hear that because it comes off as nothing more than an empty platitude. Even if it is true, but I think we can all agree on that. During any election year, the issue of education is usually pretty high on people's list of important topics, especially when it comes to local and state elections. That has certainly been the case here in Frederick County.

After the election is when officials get to the nuts and bolts of the matter, the dollars and cents. The Board of Education puts together its budget asking for "X." The state and county then turn around, never fully funding the request, and give the Board of Education a total of "X" minus "Y." One of the largest line items in the school system's budget is always for the construction and maintenance of school facilities.

Currently, the Frederick County Board of Education has a list of schools that are either going through a renovation, slated for a renovation, or need to be built. All these projects are spread out on a timeline that stretches years into the future.

Most recently, there was a fierce debate over the construction of a new elementary school. While several are needed throughout the county to alleviate overcrowding, there was only enough funding to start construction of one so it could be opened for the 2018-2019 school year. The decision had to be made to build either Sugarloaf Elementary in Urbana or Butterfly Ridge Elementary in the Hillcrest area of Frederick City. Hillcrest and Urbana are currently operating well over capacity at 140% and 130%, respectively, so it is clear that a second school in both areas is imperative. But which community was going to get a new school first?

In the end, it was announced last month that BOTH school were going to be constructed and ready to open in August 2018. It took a lot of work by a lot of people to make that happen.

Hang on, Hillcrest! Hang on, Urbana! The cavalry is on the way.

What about the other schools that are overcrowded or in need of repair? When will they be rescued, so-to-speak? The short answer, when the School Board has the money.

An interesting idea has been floated recently. Would it make sense for private sector companies to build schools and lease them back to the Board of Education? It's an interesting idea. It certainly means additional schools could come online much sooner, alleviating the problem of overcrowding in a more timely fashion. At this point, all options should be considered, even if it means finding out the idea won't work. So I commend the County Council for creating a panel to look into the feasibility of the idea.

I would like to propose another idea that would allow more, much needed schools to be built more quickly. Don't build schools that look like educational palaces. There was a time when children went to school in a one room schoolhouse. Obviously, I'm not saying we need to go back to those days, but there is no need for a school - elementary, middle, or high - to have a grand staircase or open three-story atrium. If schools weren't as extravagant as some have become, they wouldn't cost nearly as much to build.

I would venture to guess that the vast majority of people reading this column right now did not go to a school that had marble floors, chandeliers, or walls that were made up of nothing but windows looking out on a courtyard that could rival some of those found in the palaces of France and England. We still received an education.

I recently drive by what I thought was a new shopping mall under construction, NOT in Frederick County, when I asked the person I was with if he knew what stores were opening there. His response, "That's not a mall. It's going to be a school."

Some of the new school designs, while absolutely gorgeous, are completely over-the-top and unnecessary. Would I like to have gone to a high school in a building like that, instead of one built in the 70's when they used very few windows and partition walls, of course. But I received a very good education all the same without walking into a grand foyer every morning.

Should more tax dollars go towards education need? Yes. But shouldn't the schools system do its part and scale back and be a little more realistic and fiscally responsible when it comes to school construction and help by cutting costs? Education palaces don't make children smarter . . . and they are our future, after all.