

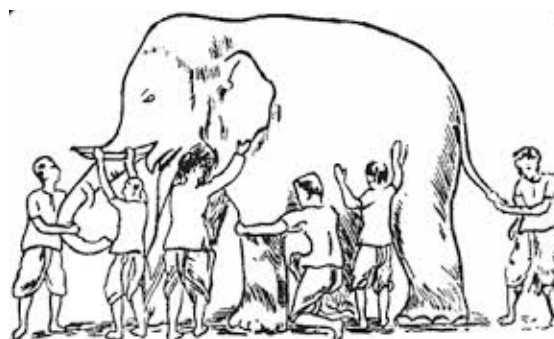
## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

December 20, 2013

### Renovation impact deserves careful study

The ancient tale of the elephant and six blind men comes to mind when I read recent letters to the editor regarding the RSU 21 proposal of \$74.8 million for renovations of the school systems of Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Arundel. In that tale, the blind men are asked to determine what an elephant looks like. One blind man feels a leg and says the elephant is like a pillar; the other men say: the tail--it's like a rope; the trunk-- a tree branch; the ear--a hand fan; the belly--a wall; and finally, one who feels the tusk says the elephant is like a solid pipe. They all compare notes and learn that they are in complete disagreement.

The RSU 21 proposal is variously portrayed as: more than most in our communities can afford, a long overdue renovation of a shockingly unsafe high school with leaks everywhere, classrooms in a pre-tech condition in rundown buildings with no sprinkler systems and inadequate bathrooms. It is asserted that the nearly \$75 million renovation would not be complete without expanded athletic fields and a costly new visual and performing arts center, all of



which will reward business owners and homeowners, increase property values and bring an influx of businesses.

The impact of the complex financing requires careful study. The actual total amount to be paid with interest will be \$113 million for a 25 year bond period. Director Tim Hussey says he hopes that "This financing strategy ....does make this easier to swallow for a lot of folks." Director Diane Robbins disagrees, saying ultimately taxpayers end up paying more, including the interest and "That only benefits the bank". A Kennebunk selectman says "It is probably the largest dollar amount ever voted on in this town".

A homeowner with an assessed value of \$300,000 is projected to pay \$8436 in additional taxes over the 25 year bond

period. Most senior citizens living on fixed incomes do not anticipate an increase of revenue equal to that impact. They will be challenged enough to keep pace with current real estate taxes and the inevitable rise in health care and the cost of living in Maine.

A critical factor missing from the public discussion is the impact of the changing demographics of the Kennebunks: the gradual decrease of student enrollments and the increase of seniors living in these communities. Projections may be risky, but the Maine Development Foundation charts nearly a 10 percent slide in youth population in the last decade, and predicts that the decline will continue for at least the next two decades. Meanwhile the population of 45- to 69-year-olds jumped 30 percent in the same 10 years. An older population has fewer children and with fewer babies, Maine has fewer schoolchildren. The youth decline is reflected in the University of Maine System which has seen steadily decreasing enrollment in recent years. USM has experienced an 11% decline in overall student enrollment.

Most citizens would support a quality education program if it enhances the life of the entire community. What will be the impact of the renovated school system on the quality of life for the seniors who live here? How will the quality of instruction and learning be improved? Will students graduate with enhanced critical thinking skills, better equipped to serve the multiple needs of an aging society?

RSU 21 ranks 4<sup>th</sup> in the U.S. for use of information technology and two years ago, the high school was named as one of

Maine's best by U.S. News, and by Newsweek, a tribute to the faculty and the young scholars themselves.

Letters which describe derelict classrooms, deficient plumbing, antiquated electrical systems and a sinking school built on shifting soil are more an indictment of the stewardship of past school boards and administrations than compelling arguments for the taxpayers to support ambitious renovations and expansion of school facilities. But the lingering question remains: how could three school buildings sink into such disrepair simultaneously, and under whose leadership and governance was this allowed to happen?

Those of us who live in Lower Village know too well the consequences of hasty approval of questionable developments. The RSU 21 proposal – untimely scheduled for vote in the dead of winter when so many taxpayers have gone south - would tap deeply into the pockets of taxpayers to the tune of \$113 million.

The citizens of Kennebunk, Kennebunkport and Arundel have the opportunity to tap deeply into their own reservoir of knowledge when they enter the voting booth on January 21<sup>st</sup> or by absentee ballot if it is requested by January 15<sup>th</sup>.

The proposal gets “curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice.

**Robert and Nona Lyons**  
**Lower Village Kennebunk**