

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SPACE PLANS

### Part two

By First Selectman Kenneth Flatto

The Board of Education and town will fix school space inadequacies at various elementary schools. A most sensible Plan and set of solutions was adopted and approved by the Elementary School Space Utilization Task Force. This Plan can be implemented quickly and consensually to solve these issues at schools in need. These solutions are the most timely and cost effective approach to provide new classroom spaces within 18 months, while not burdening taxpayers during erratic economic times.

The gist of the Task Force Plan adds classroom annexes and additions as long-lasting space at four existing elementary schools. The Plan would provide approximately 24 new classrooms, eliminate most elementary school portables, and avoid any large increase in BOE budget operating costs. The Plan calls for three classic brick prefabricated steel structured annex buildings of six classroom units each, with bathrooms, hallway lockers and HVAC and security systems. Total cost is \$1.8 million per building. The buildings last 50 years and could open by September 2009. Two proposed annexes, for Sherman school and Osborn Hill, have just been approved by the Selectmen, the Board of Finance, and RTM. This is the quickest, most economic, least disruptive way to provide classroom space at over-crowded schools.

Approval of Stratfield schools renovation plan will relieve overcrowding at that site, while bringing Stratfield up to all current codes. The Plan expects an integrated addition replacing old portables with swing space for special education, OTPT and resource needs. Funds are approved for schematic design, while the core project is one year away from starting. Our Task Force Plan calls for evaluation of a full addition to provide additional space relief at one other existing school. An addition costs about \$3 million, plus school code upgrade costs estimated to be \$1.5 million. The Task Force report calls for ongoing school maintenance improvements and voluntary redistricting as a first choice.

The Task Force did not recommend pursuing plans for any twelfth elementary school. The reasons varied: heavy cost, long implementation time, severe disruption of programs. The idea of rebuilding Oldfield has been floating around for 25 years and rejected three times by town. Why? Superficially it sounds plausible, but there is a reality which the Task Force recognized against Oldfield: 1. State and federal law require this site to comply with flood zone and FEMA standards to lift the building three feet above ground level and full flood proof the walls; 2. Architects have warned of remediation and site issues along the adjacent landfill; 3. No ample alternative site is available for the required 25,000 square foot senior center and health department building. And, if such site were eventually identified, it would take years before town could build and then move programs before any construction could start at an Oldfield site; 4. The construction cost for any new school, plus a new senior center, is over \$30 million plus \$2 million a year to operate a building; and 5. A disruptive redistricting would affect most schools in town.

The Elementary School task Force concluded there is a better Plan. The Plan to build timely efficient, cost-effective, low impact classroom space solves the elementary school space dilemma. No need to wait for years of political and planning turmoil. No dislocation of senior activities. No reason to burden our taxpayers or worsen town's debt outlook. The Task Force received the BOE's latest demographic projection showing elementary school population will drop over the next decade. Obviously, should 300 to 400 fewer children attend elementary schools within 6 years as projected, the Task Force Approved Plan will eliminate all school space problems at all elementary schools. There would even be swing space for special programs.

Our elementary schools are all excellent today and loved by the children, faculty and families of Fairfield. Few want to move from current schools. Schools are cleaner and better equipped than ever. Program funding is comprehensive and small class size is the norm. We must reduce use of portables and provide more space where needed. A common sense plan can and will work. The Task Force's Plan is on town's website: [www.fairfieldct.org](http://www.fairfieldct.org). I encourage every citizen to visit a school this spring, as Fairfield blooms. See for yourself the happy, productive students and staff doing their work superbly. See school facilities today that are prized and regarded by many educators and many Connecticut municipalities who envy Fairfield's successes. The challenge is to sustain that for the next generation. Let's get the job done wisely and quickly!