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FOCUS | CONSTRUCTION/DESIGN/ENGINEERING

There are reasons for rising school construction costs

Public school officials around the state have received sharp criticism in recent years for authorizing construction that critics decry as ostentatious and excessively expensive.

Chief among the targets, but not exclusively, are athletic facilities that are often perceived as superior to all but the largest of our NCAA Division I colleges and universities.

Without taking sides in the fray, I would simply remind everyone that K-12 education is basically a community function driven by local decisions. The bulk of the funding is derived from local resources. If particular communities want top-of-the-line facilities for their students—and are willing to pay for them—we may question their judgment but not their right to make such determinations.

Besides, I've observed that most school boards making these decisions include outstanding laymen with extensive business experience. Almost without exception, they are very professional and level-headed in determining needs, costs and financing.

Two special factors about modern-day school construction make it a more expensive proposition these days.

More technology

First, newer, more sophisticated technologies require extensive infrastructure—computerization and more elaborate laboratory space than ever before. IBM computers are a lot more expensive than the old Royal typewriters my parents once used.

Chemistry and physics labs today also are much more elaborate than anything I knew growing up.



**VOICES FROM
THE INDUSTRY**

*Fredrick J.
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Generally speaking, the cost of a facility can be tied directly to the square footage or size of the facility. New, challenging and more diverse educational programs also increase the program space of each facility. Often times you hear comments such as, "This school was good enough for me, it should be good enough for my kids." With the knowledge of available programs my children are involved with, I know the schools of the past will not be satisfactory.

More sports

Secondly, when high school athletics are concerned, we must account for many more varsity sports today. In my youth, there were very few high school swimming, soccer or lacrosse teams, each of them requiring their own special facilities. Gender equity was of little concern because there were fewer girls participating in varsity sports.

And weight training rooms back then were meager and poorly equipped—at my high school, nonexistent. In short, the high school sports landscape has exploded, bringing with it demands for more and better facilities and equipment.

For business types ever contemplating serving on a school board, it may seem simplistic to suggest that there are really only two ways to arrive at school design and construction decisions.

The first is to set a predetermined budget figure above which you simply cannot or will not go, which may be tied to debt-service concerns or taxing levels. Then consult the architect and construction manager about what you can get for that amount and no more.

A second more common approach, of course, is to start with an inventory of program needs and aspirations—a "want list" if you please. Then the architect and construction contractor can tell you what your list will cost. If that figure is higher than anticipated, you are again left with two

choices—either prioritize down the project elements to acceptable limits or persuade your constituents that higher taxes or bond issues are necessary to underwrite your long-term needs.

Either way, school boards are obligated to satisfy basic minimums required by the Indiana Department of Health and standards recommended by the state's Superintendent of Public Instruction. And you can add to that list requirements imposed by the federal government under the Americans With Disabilities Act for easy wheelchair access, Indiana Building codes and local ordinances and other required safety features.

All those health and safety aspects, as well as regulatory requirements, in and of themselves are not inexpensive, but a necessity.

So far, there is no federal or state legal requirement that school buildings be air-conditioned for more extensive use during warm weather months. That remains a local decision. But don't be surprised if more and more school boards move in that direction as year-round use of schools picks up momentum.

A movement to increase classroom time for students could surely impact the length of the school year, underscoring a need for air-conditioned buildings.

All this adds up to an awesome responsibility for school boards and administrators in the design of new and renovated buildings. The prudent use of resources, in my judgment, is taken seriously by all with whom I've worked.

Since all school board members work virtually for free, I find it difficult to be critical of those who volunteer their time. You might think about that the next time you're tempted to criticize their decisions. •

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