



High School students fill downtown sidewalks and certain LRTA buses twice daily.

One of the great questions currently under discussion in Lowell has been whether to move the High School out of the downtown to a new suburban location, most likely in the area adjacent to Cawley Stadium. This conversation, which has been underway for some time, presents the families of Lowell with two choices, both of which seem to be unacceptable:

“Keep the High School Downtown”

Lowell High School has always existed in its current location in the heart of the city. But as the high school has grown, and as driving has displaced other means of transportation, the physical impacts of its presence have become more pronounced, particularly at 2:30 in the afternoon, when it briefly becomes considerably more difficult to drive around the downtown. At this time, and during the morn-

ing rush as well, students dominate the pedestrian population, contributing an energy that some cherish and others bemoan. Teenagers jaywalking on Merrimack and Kirk Streets contribute what has been affectionately labeled as “human traffic calming” to the historic core, and cars and buses choke Father Morrisette Boulevard and French Street.

These traffic impacts are an annoyance that experienced Lowellians have learned to schedule their days around, especially since they are so brief in duration. More difficult to accept, because it impacts the students, is the current condition of the Lowell High School facility, which lags behind national and state standards in a litany of categories. It is difficult to argue for the continued use of the current high school buildings when they are not providing Lowell’s children the physical space and equipment required by current educational practice. And there is no space available on the High School property for an addition of any significant size.

“Move the High School out of Town”

This proposal, which has also been called “pulling a Lawrence,” involves the construction of a complete new facility located four miles from the center of the city, where land is ample and few site constraints exist. Such a facility could correct all of the perceived shortfalls of the current facility, including the need to bus students to sports practice. However, given its far-eastern peripheral location, it is likely to cause a net increase in busing time and costs, particularly since students would be less able to take advantage of existing LRTA routes.

More to the purpose of this study, the departure

of the high school and its 3700 people from the downtown would have a dramatic impact on the nature of downtown life. While some complain about their demeanor, there can be no doubt that high school students contribute great activity, energy, and diversity to a downtown core that can feel under-populated in their absence. They also contribute a significant amount of cash to downtown businesses. When asked about their shopping habits, a group of students guessed that each LHS pupil spends \$5 per day downtown. Even if a more accurate estimate were closer to \$2, this would still add up to over \$1 million annually.

Finally, it is hard to put a price on the value—to both to the students and the city—of the civilizing influence of daily urban exposure on students’ lives. It is fair to say that, without the downtown high school experience, many future Lowell graduates would not make the choice to spend time downtown as adults, nor would many have the nerve to thrive in city environments. One High School student commented how Lowell graduates feel more comfortable attending urban colleges than graduates from more suburban schools, and such a broadened comfort zone can be expected to have impacts into maturity as well. Since Lowellians tend to stay in Lowell, it is difficult to fathom the long-term cost to downtown of raising a generation of students unaccustomed to urban life.

A Third Way

Informal polls among downtown residents (roughly 100 to 5) and high school students (roughly 30 to 5) suggest that people cherish the high school downtown. Only white-collar office workers seem

Lowell High School

fairly evenly divided on the issue, due principally to traffic complaints. Fortunately, this choice, which always seems presented in black-and-white terms, is what philosophers would refer to as a false dialectic. A third path exists, which is a renovated high school on the current site, made possible through the acquisition of one adjoining property, the medical office to its south.

Imagined in the City's 2001 Downtown Master Plan as a retail site, this property could more importantly provide an LHS renovation with the area it needs to properly stage construction without closing the school. This renovation would be focused primarily on the replacement of the school's newer 1980 wing which, unlike the older school buildings, has been plagued with problems since its construction. These problems include leaks, toxic carpets, code violations, and a notoriously under-sized cafeteria separated from its kitchen. Without



Renovation would center on replacement of the High School's problematic 1980s wing.

getting into details, it is important to insist that any new high school in Lowell be subject to a much improved procurement and design process than was in place in the late 1970s.

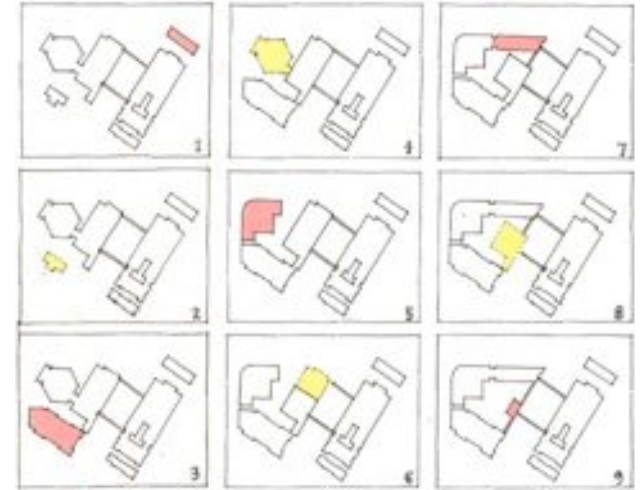
Staging

While many different approaches to renovation are possible, the most obvious solution involves construction of a new field house on the existing medical building site, and then a clockwise process of demolition and construction around the property. This process could be further eased by the acquisition of the empty and chained parking lot just across Father Morrisette Boulevard, which could be used to replace the medical building, or designated a part of the high school expansion. This lot was earlier offered to the High School for free, but "red tape" stalled its acquisition, a problem that would perhaps require City involvement to overcome. Its acquisition would add some further "breathing room" to the proposal below, but is not at all essential to its viability.

In the accompanying diagram, a nine-step renovation process is imagined as follows:

1. Begin construction on site across Morrisette, perhaps for relocated medical office (optional).
2. Demolish medical office, being sure to pro-actively relocate doctors in downtown Lowell.
3. Build new field house on cleared medical office site.
4. Demolish existing field house.
5. Build corner structure including classrooms and cafeteria.

6. Demolish northern half of building containing cafeteria.
7. Build second classroom wing.
8. Demolish southern half of building.
9. Build final pavilion along canal, most likely containing library.



This process would be slower and more complicated than the construction of a new building from scratch but, if properly handled, could be completed without any great sacrifice to student education, comfort, or convenience. It would also allow for the preservation and continued use of the school's favored older buildings, which would most likely result in a considerably lower cost than an entirely new facility.

Design

The proposed new site plan for the school aims to solve a number of current problems. First, it is larger, allowing the building to become no less complete than it would be if located on a suburban site. Second, it creates a

large green space at its center, larger than the Cox Circle property that is currently being used for sports and band practice. Third, it creates a firm, attractive edge against Arcand Drive, set directly against a broadened tree-lined sidewalk, helping to invite pedestrians between the JFK Civic Center and the Tsongas Center.

Finally, it steps back from its current location directly against the canal and trolley tracks, allowing for the



The new LHS plan includes continuing Dutton Street through the site, for student drop-offs and pick-ups.

continuation of Dutton Street through the property from Merrimack Street to Father Morrisette Boulevard. This street, one way and for school use only, would take tremendous pressure off of Morrisette, Kirk, and other downtown streets, easing the mid-afternoon choke.

The proposed plan was not designed by a school architect, which—while placing it at no disadvantage to the current facility—suggests a great amount of further study.



The 1980 wing and the medical office (shadowed in gray) would be replaced by a building that traces the perimeter of its site, creating a versatile central green.

With that said, here are some of its key features:

- The cafeteria extends towards the central green from under its classroom wing, with a large roof

that can be a green terrace if desired.

- The frontispiece to the field house and the corner building are actually continuous at the upper

Lowell High School

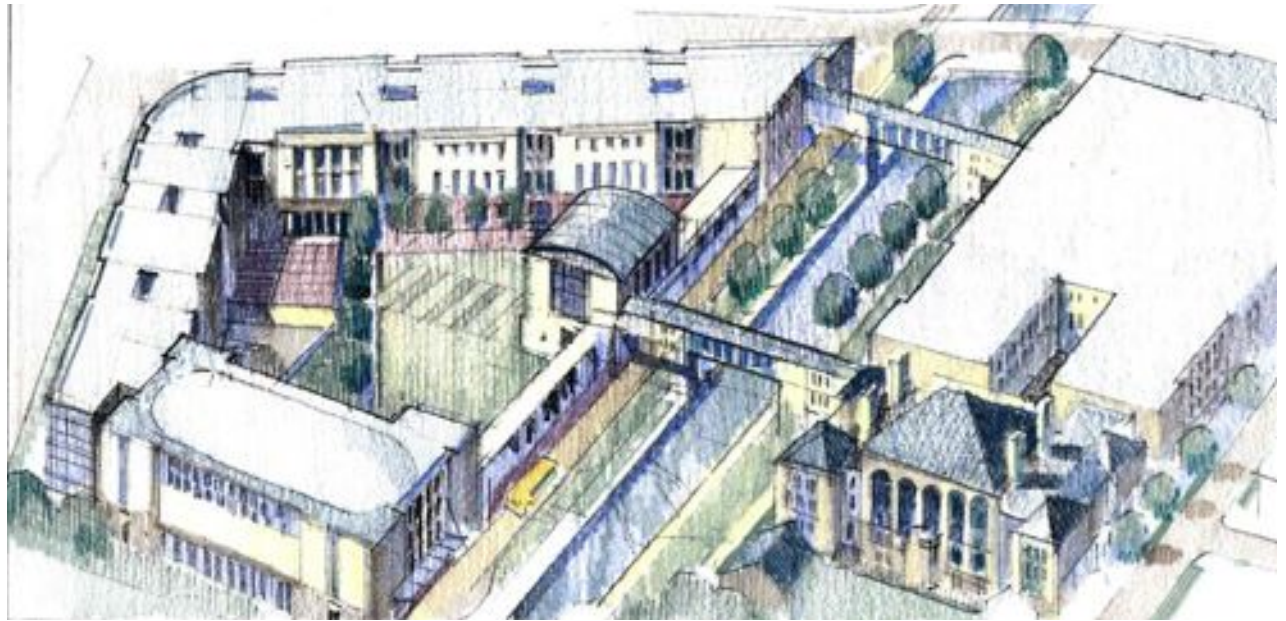
stories, but a pass through at grade allows trucks in and out of a service area and loading dock next to the cafeteria.

- The central green has a tree-lined walk around its perimeter and a large grassy center that is open to a full variety of uses.
- The new pavilion against the canal, ideally a library or resource center, is placed at the nexus of the skywalk system. Beneath the canal-side skywalk is a continuous arcade offering shelter for drop-offs and pick-ups.
- Dutton Street passes alongside this arcade, with drop-off parking along one side. While this parking would more appropriately sit along the western curb, it is likely that fears of congestion at Merrimack Street will require Dutton to run one-way south to north, which would place the drop-off zone along the canal instead.

Getting Started

Like the construction of any new high school, this proposal cannot be accomplished until State assistance is available, which is not expected soon. But such funding will materialize eventually, and when it does, it will be important to have a confirmed plan in place. Moreover, the City is much more likely to win funding for renovations once it has made application for a specific construction effort. For that reason, this long-term proposal demands short-term action if an optimal outcome is to be possible within a reasonable amount of time.

Finally, it is important to note that the City may need



A new downtown Lowell High School gives proper edges to Arcand Drive and the Merrimack Canal.

the State to waive certain school site-size requirements in order to receive funding for this project, since those requirements were created with suburban campuses in mind. Fortunately, Massachusetts is a national leader in Smart Growth, a movement and fiscal orientation that advocates against the replacement of urban schools with suburban facilities. For that reason, it will be useful to engage smart growth advocates within the State leadership in support of this project.