

So it's come to this

"Dangerous and Unsafe for Human Occupancy."

A sign slapped on the front door of a middle school on a Friday afternoon. Hurried meetings with structural engineers set for the weekend. Parents wondering what happened and where do my kids go to school now?

No, we're not talking about the aftermath of a freak earthquake, the result of a novel virus, or a poor town in a third world country. This is Greenwich and, sadly, a turn of events that was entirely foreseeable, previously predicted, and well documented. We are facing a manufactured emergency. Greenwich has known for years that its schools are at the end of their useful lives.

In 2016, the Western Middle School fields were closed because of environmental concerns; no child has run on them since. In 2019, Cardinal Stadium was closed because a parent fell through structurally unsound bleachers. In 2020, Old Greenwich School was sued for ADA non-compliance. In 2021, North Mianus was closed because of a ceiling collapse and structural issues. And last year, strain gauges were installed at Central Middle School for fear the walls were moving.

Instead of planning and envisioning the next generation of physical infrastructure, we have been in the thrall of a irresponsible, short-sighted agenda driven by the Republican majority on the Board of Estimate and Taxation to deny funding for our town's public needs so we can squeeze a few more pennies off the next year's mill rate. Those in charge of our budget call it "pay as you go," but everyone knows this really means "you pay for it, 'cause I don't need it."

So it's come to this. We've got a catastrophe of a middle school and a few more schools looking like they're ready to break down any day. And don't say we weren't warned. The school board has been asking for funds for years, but in the last budget cycle the BET's Republican majority delayed or refused to fund critical renovations for Julian Curtiss (built in 1947), Old Greenwich School (1902), Central (1958), Riverside School (1932), International School at Dundee (1962), North Street School (1954), North Mianus School (1925), and GHS (1970).

On April 1, 2021, for instance, Republican BET members voted to cut \$102,000 from the Board of Education's capital budget, a request to fund a structural engineering study of Central Middle School. The BOE feared the school was unsafe and they were right. Since that budget cut, those aforementioned strain gauges were installed at CMS to monitor shifting exterior walls. We now know how that story turned out.

Five days later, the same BET members deleted \$1,300,000 from the BOE's capital budget intended for architectural drawings to rebuild the Julian Curtis School, and rejected BOE-approved education specifications for the building. This delay had a cascading effect, pushing out the timeline for a whole series of other school renovation projects including Old Greenwich School, Riverside and Central.

All these buildings were identified in the 2018 Facilities Master Plan as requiring extensive renovations, and yet the BET's leadership has dragged its heels on every single one of them. They may claim to have our kids' best interests at heart, but their voting record demonstrates that their real interest is in delaying school funding.

In the last few days, you may have seen some blaming this fiasco on the BOE's funding priorities, but that's a red herring. The blame rests with the BET's majority voting block for delivering starvation budgets. When they refuse to adequately fund our town's capital requirements in favor of tax breaks, the backlog of critical problems becomes almost impossible to address in time. Everything needs emergency attention. This is the situation we face today.

Sure, we will come together and figure out how to duct tape Central Middle School and accelerate building a new one, but that's not the point. Parsimony is not a policy; it's the problem. We need forward-thinking visionaries who can plan appropriately for our current needs, while setting a great foundation for the next generation that will inherit our town.

Otherwise, after this manufactured emergency passes, there's going to be another. Maybe the storm-driven flooding at Old Greenwich School will become a torrent. Maybe an aide at Julian Curtis carrying a kid upstairs with a broken leg will slip and fall herself. Maybe North Street School will sink into the Earth.

We have more than enough resources to manage these problems. This is Greenwich after all, the 12th richest city in the country, according to a recent [survey](#). What's more, the BET doesn't have to use existing cash to do it. Why has it refused year after year to issue a long-term bond like other towns do, a prudent and tested way to meet long-term capital spending needs? Goodness knows we can afford it. Greenwich has a pristine balance sheet and a triple-A rating that is 80% guaranteed based on our gold-plated grand list.

It's time to craft a vision of what Greenwich could be... *should* be. And that means better leadership. The only way to hold town leadership accountable is with your voice and your vote. Speak up, let the BET know how you feel. Demand that they fund our schools and other critical town projects. Ask why they think it is more important to replace a rink where our kids skate than it is to repair the schools where they learn. The decisions made by these individuals can affect your life overnight. Just ask the parents and kids at Central Middle School.

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Glen A. Canner, RTM District 12
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Mary Flynn, RTM District 12
Allison Ghiorse, RTM District 1
Dana Gordon, RTM District 8
Sarah Haag-Fisk, RTM District 9
Mareta Hamre, RTM District 10

Shaye Hester, RTM, District 9
Scott Kalb, RTM, District 7
Myra Klockenbrink, RTM District 8
Mark Kordick, RTM, District 9
Lucy Krasnor, RTM District 5
Marina Rosin Levine, RTM District 7
Mary Ellen Markowitz, RTM District 2
Janet McMahon, RTM District 8
Anthony Moor, RTM District 7
Cheryl Moss, RTM District 8
Jonathan Perloe, RTM District 8
Nerlyn Pierson, RTM District 11
Molly Saleeby, RTM District 8
David Snyder, RTM District 6
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Joanne Steinhart, RTM District 9
Joan Thakor, RTM District 5
Lucy von Brachel, RTM, District 4
Allison Walsh, RTM District 3
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