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Knox County School construction costs probed Part VI

Renovate or build?

The multi-million dollar question

I thought that by now I would have run out of things to write about concerning this issue, but my research has been like an archeological expedition, the more I dig, the more I find to report, the more I report the more questions I get asked; which requires



**By Sanford C Loy,
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me to keep digging. In summary, the discrepancies and misunderstandings regarding how Knox County has been building in general (including schools) are broader and deeper than I had suspected. Equally, the public's interest in knowing the truth and exposing the waste has been overwhelming.

Unfortunately... some architects, contractors, engineers and construction managers are as guilty as anyone for throwing gas on the fire of misunderstanding.

Not out of malice but often from lack of information... and sometimes from posturing to protect one's position. Newer ways to design and build are perceived as "complicated" because the people who are supplying services currently want to keep it "complicated" to promote a fear of change.

The empirical reality is this; the method of CM Agency, as I presented last week, is a very simple, common sense method which is totally transparent, been proven

to work consistently and is sanctioned by the CMAA, (www.cmaa.com). One has to wonder what is objectionable about a process which saves money, time, and hassles.

With savings from progressive CM processes and reasonable changes in design standards the cost of new construction increasingly trends toward being less expensive than the cost of renovating. That said the considerations are not consistent enough to formulate a generic definition

about where the "butterfly line" is, (where new construction makes more sense than renovation every time). Every situation must be evaluated on its own merits. The older a building is, the more severe the challenges are to bring it up to today's standards and codes. Every building passes a point in time where the cost of renovation makes a reasonable return on investment virtually unattainable.

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Renovate or build?

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The circumstances that make renovation LESS attractive are:

- Environmental issues such as asbestos, lead paint and mold.
- Fire code issues such as lack of egress and fire separation requirements.
- Design inadequate for current needs and difficult to correct such as small classrooms, hallways, gymnasiums etc. typically defined by structural walls in older buildings.
- Hidden construction issues where more work must be done than anticipated.
- Materials in the original building such as old electrical systems, cast iron pipes, asbestos, lead paint and plaster which are no longer used in mainstream construction, thus making them much less desirable as salvageable elements due to the excessive cost required to repair or replace them.
- The scope of renovation work is difficult to define in drawings and specifications, thus making the architectural and engineering services more expensive because they require more time. Concurrently, the bidding of the work is not as accurate because the bids are based upon the same drawings and specs, thus a larger contingency is required to be budgeted to cover errors and omissions.

The assets of a building which make renovation MORE desirable are:

- Historical value of the building.
- Emotional attachment by the community.
- The original design is substantially close to being what the new

function requires per today's standards. (warehouse, office building or mall)

- The location is such that restoration is intrinsic to the value of the renovated building.
- Environmental issues have been dealt with previously or are minimal.
- The original construction is superior in quality to the point that the building's major elements currently have a life expectancy of another 30+ years; such as concrete framing, terrazzo floors, large windows, or well maintained wood features such as architecturally accurate doors and cornice work.
- The original building has been both well maintained and been a building where it has not had chronic mechanical, roofing or plumbing system problems such as leaks, mold or other environmental and health related issues.

Most buildings fall into one category or the other if considered objectively. While new construction provides a set of "known" results which are more predictable, there is often a loss of emotional connection many communities have with older historical buildings.

The Tennessee Theatre is an example of the assets of a building, as listed above, making restoration the obvious choice. Had the goal been to create a state of the art theatre... it would have made more sense to do what Regal did by building the new Riviera on Gay Street. Both have been successful because they have each achieved their individual goals based upon different situations.



Carter Elementary School, built in 1938.

The issue of whether to build a new Carter Elementary or renovate the old one is of course the topic of the month around town. Of the items listed above as assets which make a renovation more desirable, I don't think Carter Elementary meets any of them. Conversely, I think it meets almost every reason I listed which make renovation less desirable.

Last week the School Board met to hear what Dr. McIntyre thought about this issue. It was with great interest that all of Knox County watched to see how the Director handled the revisiting of his embattled capital plan. Would he stay the course, or revise his plan and build a new school for Carter?

Dr. McIntyre's recommendation to stay the course of renovating Carter Elementary surprised few. His logic, on the other hand,

did. **To say we can't afford it is somewhat confusing. Has he really missed the point that there is already enough money allocated to do both the SW Sector School and a new Carter Elementary if done the right way?** He is far too intelligent for me to believe that is the case.

McIntyre said "most" of the experts he talked to told him renovating was the best solution when the structure was sound etc....I don't know who these reported experts are but I didn't tell him that. Mike Brady (Architect) didn't tell them that. Kent Rose (General Contractor) didn't tell them that. Who are these mystery experts whose opinions he values more than those who will stand up in public and attach their name with their opinions?

Why is the county government continually operating behind closed doors,

unnamed sources, mystery data, and quotes from "the people we talked too"? As I have said herein I don't see Carter Elementary fitting into the criteria which would make renovation the best option. I haven't found a single colleague or architect yet who thinks renovation generically makes more sense than new construction; much less at Carter Elementary.

One would think the recent election results would have sent a clear message that the public supports Carter getting a new school; the voters elected two new school board members whose campaigns highlighted their support for a new Carter school. After all, the voters will be the ones paying for it. Kim Sepesi and Mike McMillan both promised their support for a new school and won.

One would think administrators and politicians

would be getting the message that ultimately the voters/taxpayers are the stockholders in government. In 15 days we have a change in the guard in Knox County, from the Mayor's office to the School Board, and I optimistically anticipate a huge change in the direction of OUR County.

On September 1st we need Three Dog Night on the court house steps singing "Celebrate" followed by Tim McGraw singing "Not a moment too soon."

Next week: When is a "bid" really a bid?

Following week: The TRUTH about CM Agency for public projects.

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