



Let's build Durfee Higher

By Nick Christ

Imagine designing and building your dream home. It is everything you need for now and in the future – indeed, it is an investment that you know will pass down through the generations, so your children and grandchildren and greatgrandchildren will benefit. You know it is challenging, but it is worth it, because it is an investment in the future of your family.

Then, imagine getting the bill, and much to your surprise, you must pay only a fraction of the cost. The bulk of the cost was invested in your future by someone who believes in you.

The city of Fall River has just that opportunity within its grasp. We have the chance to build a facility that will transform the City and its educational, cultural, and economic environment for generations. Best yet: we can get it done at a cost to the city at a fraction of the total cost.

What is this outstanding investment? The renovation/replacement of Durfee High School. The Fall River School Committee has been granted a match from the Massachusetts School Building Authority to build a new school worthy of our children and our future. The project will enable this community to get a brand new high school that will equip and prepare generations of young people for the challenging world of the 21st century, while our City gets a modern, effective learning space to attract new families and businesses to our city.

Many say it is way past time to replace the school. Durfee High School and the alumni it has produced share a long and storied history. First located in the classic space on Rock Street, the high school moved to its current location on Elsbree Street when construction was completed in 1978. The sprawling, multi-level 525,000 square foot facility was originally designed in the then-in-fashion “open classroom” design, which proved to be problematic to student learning. There have been renovations, but design and construction problems, including mold, carpets that needed to be removed leaving noisy concrete floors, inadequate heating and cooling, and fogged windows with faulty seals continue to plague the day-to-day operation of the school and have left our high school students with a crumbling structure that does not serve our city or our young people well.

Other considerations on the need of this project include:

- The regional accreditation review by NEASC in 2012, citing several facility areas that could impact future accreditation, which can affect the economic health of the community and threaten graduates' access to federal financial aid for college.

- Program space where students in vocational programs, including the pathway programs geared to prepare students to good jobs without post-secondary training, needs updates.
- Community space so that others can use the high school facilities.

The challenges ahead are many, and include continuing to educate 2350 students while the project is underway. The overarching goal? To create a facility that meets the community's educational needs for decades to come and achieves the highest standards as a Northeast Collaborative High Performance School.

For a number of months, educators, community members, designers, students, and construction specialists have been meeting to dream together about what this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity can mean for the high school and for the City. As a member of this group, I have been impressed with the energy and vision of our community leaders and educators. More than just building a building, the planning committee is embracing this an opening to re-engineer education, solve problems, and visualize possibilities that will affect us for decades.

The community is invited to participate in this exciting project. Over the next few weeks, all are invited to weigh in at public meetings where the architects and project managers are looking for input. Watch the newspapers and the Fall River Schools web site announcement of those meetings. A web site and social media channels designed specifically for community engagement will be available soon.

So come along on this journey toward this building for the future.

Mr. Christ is President and CEO of Baycoast Bank and chair of the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce Education Committee.