

Perspective

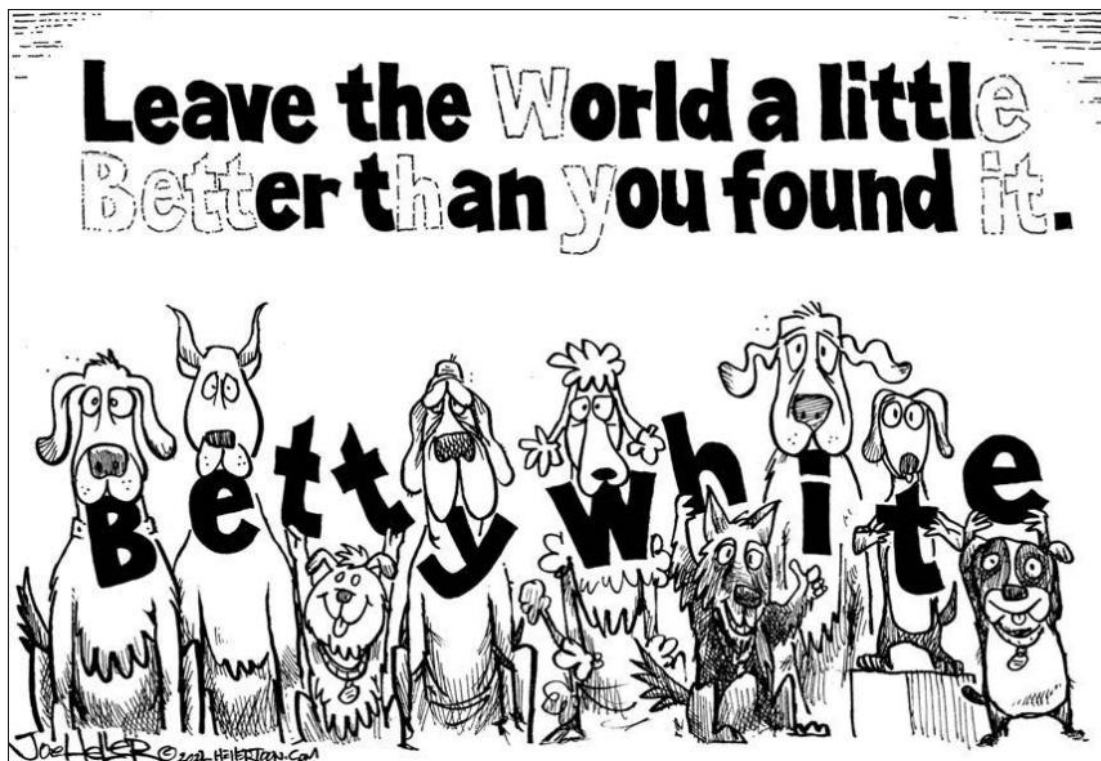
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School Board letter

The following is the text of a letter sent by the Tuscola School Board referenced in our editorial at right.

We have been thinking about all the hubbub with the people who are up in arms about the school board bonding \$15M and with a performance contract. We have had people question the track refurbishment over education facilities. However, what some may not realize is that the track was a safety hazard and is used regularly by teachers as education in the form of PE, both at the high school and East Prairie. Some residents have linked the board's recent move to contract with Omni with the track replacement. This is because the track was on the list of items that was on Omni's list. The school board created a list of items the board felt needed to be updated. This was done before Omni took over the list from the board. We requested Omni do a thorough review of the school's facilities.

We have also had people make assumptions about our RFP with Omni, likening it to a back door fast pitch sale by forked tongued salesmen or as a party planner. An RFP is different than a bid per Illinois procurement rules. There are reasons why you choose an RFP over a bid and typically performance is favored over price which means you get what you need and not the cheapest thing on the market. Darold Spillman, who has been on the board for 10 years, doesn't recall a single year that the board didn't spend less than \$30,000 on the HVAC at North Ward, which was put in place by the lowest bidder, who put in a discontinued model as new and didn't install it correctly. You may ask, who has been left paying for the poor work of this lowest bidder, the citizens of Tuscola CUSD 301.

All school board members are tax-paying individuals of the Tuscola CUSD 301, which might be a surprise to many. We chose a partner to work with that was recommended by many local school boards as a caring person who only wants the best for the district (this was the sentiment of other boards and not Omni, the other boards of both small and large school districts had noth-

ing but positive comments about Mark Graves (founder of Omni). If Upchurch is correct in that small schools start down that road of a performance contract but quickly change their ways, why would so many schools give nothing but positive comments about Mark Graves and the performance contract method? The partner we decided to work with is bonded. Why is this important, because if the job is done wrong or a subcontractor goes out of business then the work gets done the right way. The school board has been figuring out the best way to fix the cracking hallways at North Ward. We have been told by Upchurch that to fix the issue we have to cut out the concrete and pour it again correctly. This is not a cheap fix and something that shouldn't be necessary if someone oversaw the work to ensure it was done correctly.

There has been talk about the architects Omni is using. We were given the option by Omni to use any architect which we choose for Omni to work with. We looked at several and let Omni know that we were pleased with the forward-thinking and designs that Gray Design Group showed. We looked at past work from Gray Design, we looked at their concepts for a future in our schools using a different layout while keeping the exterior of the school. They are an architectural firm that can move our buildings into the future. If you are interested in seeing their work please look at <https://www.graydesigngroup.com/>.

Any referendum would only be for the \$15M and not for any work or how it would be done. If the \$15M in bonding goes to a referendum by collecting enough signatures, 415 to be exact, it would cost the district a minimum of \$100,000 in the cost for the debt certificate. Money that comes from the education fund (directly from the money used on kids' education). This is because we still have a \$15M debt we have to pay. Darold Spillman let a fellow Tuscola CUSD 301 citizen know that he wished he had a weekly column to put the school boards voice out, but we would have to use school education funds to buy space in the paper. Our

voice is in open meetings that very few attend. The only regular in-person attendance is David Porter (Tuscola Review). In all the time the school board has been talking about what we wanted to do and how we were going to do it, we only had one person really ask us questions about what we were going to do, how we were going to do it. One person in two years. We don't have another forum besides social media and letters to parents to get our word out. Newspapers are in the business to sell newspapers, they report what they see and hear. As anyone who has ever played the game of telling your neighbor something and seeing how much it changes as it goes around realizes that everyone sees and hears things differently.

In our 5-year plan, work is done in phases. Just because we use a particular method for the first phase, doesn't mean we are locked in for all the work. We are free to do the work ourselves, hire another company, or go out for bids. We as a school board did not go into this blind or naive. We sought out information from our lawyer about the bonding and contract issue. We put the RFP out for anyone to bid on. We listened to former leaders in the school district and used the experience of other school boards.

In the end, every member of the school board wants the best for the students, teachers, and administrators. The updates at TCHS, East Prairie, and North Ward are a long time coming.

Our children deserve these updates.

At this time, we would ask that you NOT sign a petition to send the Debt Bonds to a referendum. We know this may sound cliché, but trust those who you elected to the board to use their resources and knowledge of the process to give our children the best educational facilities we can.

Happy Holidays!

Sincerely,
Tuscola CUSD 301
Board members

Brad Ingram, President; Bob Devlin, Vice-President; Darold Spillman, Secretary; Jessi Young, Member; Jerrod Baird, Member; Wade Wilcox, Member; Chris Rennels, Member.

Our opinion — Our response to School Board letter

In giving our opinion, over the last several weeks, that the Tuscola School Board should not have used the energy performance contracting method for building renovations, we have strived to not disparage the Board members who donate their time to serve. The Board has not applied the same constraints toward us.

Just before Christmas, the Board sent a letter out to parents that, among other things, dismisses the newspaper's opinion as just wanting to sell newspapers. That implies that we want to stir things up to increase our circulation. Frankly, it's more of a risk to us to take on controversy.

It's not a great business model. As an example, when the Board signed a contract with Omni Energy Partners, we ran the entire scope of work listed in the contract. It took up two full pages in the paper entirely at our expense. We would have to sell a heckuva lot of papers at a buck a piece to pay for two pages. The School Board doesn't seem to understand that it really is about journalistic integrity for us. In the 8 years that I've owned newspapers, I've never taken a salary out of any of them. For the School Board to dismiss our motives as just wanting to sell newspapers indicates to us a disrespect for the independent watchdog role of the press as designed by the U.S. Constitution as well as a desperate cry to kill the messenger.

Setting aside the personal digs, let's look at what else the School Board had to say. There were several things in the letter that were misleading at best.

The Board stated that if the petitions being collected forced a referendum, it would cost the district \$100,000 out of its education fund. That's their estimate of fees and interest on debt certificates they issued.

First, the statement assumes the voters would turn down the referendum. Secondly, they have that expense regardless. If they issue the \$15 million in bonds, they still have to pay the interest and fees on the debt certificates; it just would come out of the bond money instead of the education fund. It's all taxpayer money.

The debt certificates are of their own doing to try to avoid having a referendum. They couldn't just issue bonds for \$15 million for capital improvements, so they borrowed the \$15 million using debt certificates with the goal of paying them off with the bond proceeds. It's a technical move; they can issue bonds to pay off debt without a direct referendum.

That's on them. They had no big debts. They borrowed the money to create a debt. Are we to assume that they had no confidence they could convince voters to approve a \$15 million referendum?

In the same paragraph, they comment that I am the only one who regularly attends School Board meetings implying that nobody really cares about school business enough to come to the meetings and ask questions. It's misleading because the district was live streaming its meetings and people watched remotely. I live streamed the last one and Facebook data shows that the video reached over 660 people. Just 'cause you can't see 'em doesn't mean they aren't there.

Still in the same paragraph, they complain that they have no outlet to get the word out except through social media and letters to parents. They state that Board Member Darold Spillman wishes he had a column in the paper to share the school's voice but that they would have to pay for such a column out of education funds.

There is so much wrong with that statement. First, they've never asked me to run a column for them. In Arcola, the school superintendent submits articles with some frequency. I own that newspaper, too. If I do it for Arcola, why wouldn't I do it here?

Second, they could always submit a letter to the editor.

Third, they sent this letter, and a previous one, to parents and teachers but they didn't send it to me. If you want me to hear your message, maybe you ought to send it to me. They have my email address.

Fourth, they're willing to spend \$100,000 to avoid a referendum but they're not willing to invest even 50 bucks on a publicity campaign? That's just nuts.

It's always "education funds" when they balk at an expense. Do they not understand that it's all taxpayer funds? If they weren't staring at \$21 million in bond funds to levy for, imagine all the

education funds they could tap with the city's big tax increment finance (TIF) district expiring.

The Board went on to imply that the newspaper is like a game of telephone, where one person tells something to another and they tell another and so on until the story changes. It's not an accurate description of how newspapers work. It's offensive. I've been in this business for nearly 40 years and have a truck load of newspaper awards on my wall. I'm not saying I'm infallible, but I can hold my own among anyone's journalism credentials.

But, it's not about me. In giving our opinion about the direction the district was going, we consulted with several attorneys, an experienced bond counsel, an architect, several contractors and school administrators from other districts. It's not just our lay opinion; we have developed our opinion through research with credible, experienced players.

I wonder, how much of that did individual School Board members do? I know there have been at least a couple of offers for the School Board to sit down with some of these same people, and to date, they haven't done that.

Back to the letter, the Board seems to think they have an architect on this project and that the work was bid out. Neither is true. Omni has an architect. The architect works for Omni. It is not the school's architect.

Omni was chosen by the Board through a request for proposals, which really was a request for qualifications. The school did not bid out any work. They selected Omni before any projects were ever outlined. Perhaps Omni sought bids from multiple subcontractors. We don't know and it doesn't matter. A private bid is not the same as a public bid.

The letter also points out work that needs to be done at North Ward Grade School citing it as an example of how the low bid does not ensure the best work. Guess what? The high bid doesn't, either. While we think of North Ward as a new school, it is 20 years old, and concrete is not exactly a precise science.

As for the flawed heating/cooling at the school, it sounds like the checks and balances of public bidding may have failed the school and nobody held anybody accountable for it. Under the energy performance contracting method, those same checks and balances don't exist. If doing something right is going to exceed the bid, what's to keep the contractor from cutting corners? There is no professional overseer of the work.

So, it's an illogical argument: When we had checks and balances, they didn't work, so let's fix it by removing the checks and balances.

While we're at it, let's talk about transparency. While we were initially pleased with the information discussed in open session, when it came time to fine-tune the project, the Board took it behind closed doors. The superintendent stated in a previous letter that the Board appointed a committee of two Board members and himself to meet with Omni to narrow the scope of work.

Any time I hear "two Board members," that's a red flag that they're purposefully trying to circumvent Illinois' Open Meetings Act. Well, guess what? The statute states that any committee or subcommittee of a public body is a public body subject to the Act. Where are the minutes and agendas of those meetings?

I'm quite familiar with the Open Meetings Act, and that caveat in particular. In my previous career, I served as a director with the Illinois Press Association. I'm intimately acquainted with that particular line because I wrote it. I consider it to be a hallmark of my career.

An effort to put the bond issue on the ballot did not gather enough signatures over the Christmas break. Organizers of the drive say it wasn't for a lack of interest; a late start coupled with COVID quarantines and the holidays doomed the petition. But it really wasn't the bond issue that the opposition group wanted to stop. Those we talked to favor borrowing the money; rates are low and the expiration of a TIF district will open up millions in assessed valuation. And, like us, they favor doing the renovations. But they, and I'll add "we," just want the School Board to be good stewards of our tax dollars and that means public bidding with checks and balances.

But other than that, yeah, we just want to sell newspapers.

— David Porter