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Explain, please

Patrons of the Wasatch School District deserve an explanation. How is it that the original \$400,000 plan for a modest new administration building somehow grew into a \$4 million renovation of an historic school?

A state attorney general's review of the process that led to the renovation contract found no evidence of conflict of interest or "other actionable conduct." But Assistant Attorney General Philip C. Pugsley says he was "disturbed" by the "loose way the project appears to have been managed." And rightly so.

The most disturbing part of this puzzle is that Wasatch School Board and district officials have refused to explain their actions. There are several questions the school board should answer for the taxpaying patrons of the district:

* Why did the school district sign a contract for the renovation with Architectural Design West in June 2000 and allow work to start on the project that summer, when the contract was not approved in a public meeting of the school board until December 2000? The contract was invalid for six months and the vague nature of the agreement eventually led to the district being sued.

* Why did the Wasatch School Board ignore recommendations of its own committee appointed to study the best uses for the 100-year-old North School and how to pay for any renovation? In February 1999, the committee recommended the district not spend funds to refurbish the old school, but encourage civic organizations to use it for community activities. In 1995 the board's long-range planning committee had recommended the North School property be sold to save on maintenance and personnel.

* Why didn't the district involve the public in formulation of its renovation plans instead of holding a series of closed meetings? Tracy Taylor, the Wasatch PTA's legislative liaison, said the PTA had tried to determine when the board decided to renovate the old school but couldn't "find it in the minutes." Patrons of the district, which is faced with a growing student population and budget constraints, deserve to hear the rationale for an expenditure of that size.

* And perhaps most important, how can the district now justify its failure to explain to a concerned citizens group how and why the project changed and grew 10-fold in cost? That group of 27 solid citizens, getting nothing for their pains from the school board, wrote to the attorney general with these very reasonable questions.

They should be commended for diligently pursuing an explanation. And it's high time the school board provided one.



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