

## We need state oversight in school construction

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The legislative audit on school construction was released a few weeks ago, reporting on 21 out of 40 school districts during 2006-2008. It stated that the new Wasatch High School is by far the largest and most expensive of the seven high schools built.

That was not a surprise to many of us who watched this unfold. Our \$59.5 million bond did not cover the project. The audit cites a \$15.5 million overrun that the voters did not agree to, no cap on construction costs, and a questionable architectural bid process that resulted in an opulent design.

This is not the first misstep by Wasatch School District. In 2000, the infamous North School renovation cost \$4 million, instead of the \$400,000 modest new building initially planned. The Utah Attorney General's Office found six laws were broken and about \$1.8 million disappeared without documentation. No one was held accountable by either the attorney general's office or our county attorney.

Our present superintendent, business administrator and a few school board members were around when that happened and should have adapted to the lessons learned.

The new high school construction referenced in this audit makes that renovation look like milk money. Some of the same problems have resurfaced: a potentially improper bid process, no safeguards in place to secure public funds and no public explanations.

Our Truth in Taxation meeting in August 2007 was packed with our state representatives, and the Utah Taxpayers Association was there to hear a weak accounting of the obscene 49.34 percent increase in one year. The Utah Taxpayers Association publicly criticized the event as confusing instead of clarifying. The tax increase was enacted anyway.

In an effort to ensure the tax money spent on the audit is not wasted, here are a few recommendations that would help the taxpayers of Wasatch County and school districts around

the state:

1.) The Legislative Auditor General should release the names of the school districts in the audit, which weren't originally given. How else can citizens know how their individual district is doing?

2.) The AG's office has had a complaint for two years concerning Wasatch School District's mismanagement. The audit confirmed our fears, and an investigation is reasonable. Our school board's recent public response to the audit reveals the board's lack of understanding of a proper bid process and cost control mechanisms, and its sincere belief this overrun was uncontrollable.

This could happen again with our next construction project.

3.) Local school districts are left to their own volition when it comes to school construction. The state needs to step in with oversight, regulations and incentives. One of many ideas is to have a state employee guide each district through the bond and construction process and review all contracts prior to execution.

4.) The Legislature has discussed a bill to control property tax increases, in which the public would have to vote on any increase larger than a certain percentage. We need this option in Wasatch County. Also, the public needs binding referendum capabilities concerning school districts when board members refuse to answer to the public.

5.) Finally, most procurement codes (state laws) do not have penalties attached to them. When any public entity makes undeniably poor decisions during the construction process, there is no accountability.

How will Utah begin to afford the cost of school construction in the future? Just following existing Utah State Office of Education construction guidelines would have saved the public \$28 million. That would have built another elementary school.

The amount of money that could be saved in 40 school districts for the next 25 years is staggering. Instead of opulent schools, investment in teacher salaries and curriculum is where the most direct benefit for each student would be realized.

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