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Let's hear Plan B

Tuesday, November 20th, 2012 10:00 PM

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By Editorial

There are many things we have long admired about the Park District of Oak Park and its approach to governance. One of them was in sharp display last week when the board and staff announced the district was stepping away from a plan to build a new shared headquarters, with the elementary schools as the partner, behind Oak Park's village hall.

Two reasons were cited for their decision. An early estimate of the cost of building's adequate underground parking was higher than anticipated and likely pushed the overall cost of the project to a troubling number. More notably, though, was the park district's conclusion that public support for the project was weak, a conclusion gained by two public meetings where the input, especially from potential residential neighbors, was understandably hostile.

Too often government agencies — and government agencies are people, too, as Mitt Romney might say — get their notions and are reluctant to back away. This "we know better" attitude has created a lot of disdain toward government at a lot of levels.

Over a decade of astounding accomplishment by this park district, the board and administration have developed an uncanny ear for public input. Whether the issue was large or small, the parks have actively and effectively invited citizens to speak out and then astounded critics by actually listening and adjusting plans.

There is more than one park district activist who started out thinking they were just a crank tilting at windmills and wound up on the planning committee for the very project they were critical of.

From the day it was announced as a serious possibility, we have opposed the idea of cramming a shared headquarters for parks and schools on the village hall parking lot. But let us reiterate our support for a headquarters collaboration between the two entities. It is a solid concept. But it has to be done affordably, and it has to be done in a reasonable location.

In the meantime, the aspect of the original plan that had District 97 shift its building department to the village's public works garage and the parks taking over the school district's garage on Madison Street still likely has merit.

Keep talking. And we look forward to Plan B.

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