Beating the Odds

BY Leslie Ludtke

Critics said it couldn't be done, but community leaders in Waterford were determined to provide the district's children with the educational facilities they needed.

Some people say the age of miracles is past, but many in the Waterford Jt.1 School District do not subscribe to this philosophy. The new 90,000 square foot Evergreen Elementary School is proof of this. Passing a building bond referendum on the first try is a difficult task, but not an impossible one.

The community. The Waterford-Rochester region in the 1980s underwent a dramatic transformation from a collection of quiet, rural villages to an area of fast-paced growth. A newly completed sewer project, the availability of comparatively inexpensive development property, and an easy commuting distance to several industrial and urban areas made the Waterford area attractive to potential residents. By 1988 residential construction was booming.

The local K-8 population mushroomed from 775 students in the 1985-86 school year to 1,075 students in the 1989-90 term. There had not been any additional classroom space provided since 1968. Waterford's aging schools were crowded beyond limitations. Students were

Main entrance of the Evergreen Elementary School.
being instructed in converted shower stalls, storage rooms, the basements, and even a stairwell landing.

The dire situation was underscored by an article in a local newspaper citing the Rochester kindergarten building as one of the worst physical plants in the state. It had been built in 1908 and had a 1950s addition with no self-contained heating or plumbing and inadequate electrical outlets.

In the fall of 1988 the school board assembled a facilities study committee, comprising board members, administrators, teachers, and concerned local citizens, to examine the existing buildings and make recommendations for steps the district should take.

After careful study of the district’s facilities and needs, the committee made the following recommendations:

- Close the antiquated kindergarten build-

ing. Bringing it up to code would be more costly than to build equal square footage from scratch.
- Section the middle school’s two large team-teaching areas into eight conventional classrooms.
- Move the fifth grade out of the middle school and into the existing graded school, which would become a fourth- and fifth-grade intermediate building.
- Build a new K-3 facility with eight sections of kindergarten and six sections each of grades one through three.

In the spring of 1989 the board went through the process of interviewing and selecting an architectural firm. More than a designer of buildings, the architect must have good communication skills, look at all possible options, and help educate the community as to what steps are being taken at all times. The board decided. Good public relations is just as critical to the project as competent design. PSI Design, Inc., of Big Bend was chosen as the firm that could best meet the district’s needs.

PSI’s evaluation of the situation brought the board face to face with harsh reality: site preparation, building costs, and other expenses would total approximately $6 million.

A project of this magnitude would have been difficult to complete under the best of circumstances, and we were faced with several other hurdles.

Due to the increasing student population, the district had been forced to raise school funding from property taxes 61 percent over the previous year. Also, controversy developed over the site for the proposed building. The best parcel of land owned by the district was being used as an environmental center in conjunction with the high school district.

To complicate matters, the district’s standing as a K-8 district was confusing to many constituents. Some people who had lived in the area for many years were unaware that the high school district was a separate domain and its land was not the same as the graded school district’s. What’s more the board was not united behind the project.
The word around town was, “It’s simply impossible!”

**The campaign.** In November 1989 the board asked to borrow the needed funds and hoped, like many boards, that a petition for referendum would not occur.

Opponents of the project were able to gather the necessary signatures, however, and a referendum was set for the regular election the following April.

A citizens committee met and determined that a vigorous effort would have to be made if the referendum was to pass. Committee members decided not to complicate the referendum drive by presenting detailed drawings or picking a site. Energies were spent emphasizing the need. In this way all options were kept open and prevented additional electors from joining the opposition.

Most community residents had not been inside the district’s facilities in many years. The buildings had always been well-maintained, and the extent of the overcrowding was not apparent from the outside. Clearly, area citizens needed to be educated about Waterford’s situation.

In January 1990 the board held a special meeting to listen to citizens’ concerns and help clear up any misconceptions. A slide presentation showed code violations, overcrowding, and teaching stations being used that were never intended for student use. The architect also presented slides that explained design and location options.

In February school board members who were part of the citizens committee, along with the district administrator and the architect, attended a “Get Out the Vote” seminar sponsored by the WASB. Everyone came home pumped-up and ready to go with many basic, easy-to-follow tactics essential for success. We used the following strategy:

- Educate first, then campaign.
- Above all else, emphasize the need for facility.
- Identify supporters and remind them to vote.
- Do not try to change minds — never argue with opponents. It’s like asking people to change political parties.
- Act like a winner. Many people will vote “yes” because they want to be on a winning team.
- Maximize personal contacts — do not become complacent.
- Don’t rush — don’t burn yourself out. Four to six weeks is a good length of time to campaign.
- Be honest and stick to your convictions. The motivation for the campaign should be what’s best for the children and not any political advantages or disadvantages.
- Be united — if possible.

The committee collected supporters’ names through surveys, door-to-door canvassing, phone canvassing conducted from voting records of the last election, networking with family and friends, and gathering census records of households with preschoolers.

These names were entered into a database. The evening before the election phone banks were set up at area businesses and volunteers called 1,600 voters and reminded them to vote.

**Victory.** On the evening of April 3, 1990, the final tally came in: 963 yes; 934 no — not exactly an overwhelming victory, but all that was required.

Against the odds, gossip, and the opposition of two of three local newspapers, the impossible task was accomplished! The board had fulfilled its role as community leader and had successfully orchestrated a majority vote.

By putting political priorities and egos aside, all groups had worked and triumphed in a common goal. Finally, plans could be made to meet the needs of the future, as well as correct the inadequacies of the past.

The euphoria of passage was exhilarating but short-lived. Still the vexing problems of choosing a site and completed design existed.

**Getting ready to build.** From the time the referendum passed until mid-August, the architect worked on a detailed site study comparing the three possible locations. Available area, immediate needs, future
growth, vehicle and pedestrian access, safety, building security, site ownership, utilities, water tables and weight bearing capacities were taken into account. Soil borings were made and analyzed from all sites and added to the equation. After careful evaluation, the strengths and weaknesses of each site were presented. The board was now able to reach a decision based on all available facts.

Not everyone was in agreement. Citizens expressed passionate arguments either for or against all sites for a variety of reasons. The difficulty lay in agreeing on a location that would best serve the needs of the entire community.

The graded school board and the high school board spent many long hours in meetings, and two special annual meetings were held (one in each district) for members of the community. Finally the two boards agreed to a land trade, which resulted in an acceptable site at a minimal cost to taxpayers and preserved the environmental center.

A building committee, made up of board members, administrators, teachers, custodians, and local citizens, was formed in May 1990. Along with the architect, the committee toured 12 newer schools throughout the state and collected slides and notes to aid in design concepts.

The tours proved to be essential to the design process. They also strengthened our communications with the architect.

Since the district had built no new facilities recently we believed it was necessary to observe what other districts had done — to study all types of structures, good and bad.

During the tours we interviewed custodians, teachers, aides, and cooks, as well as administrators to find out what they liked and didn’t like about the building, what they would do differently, and what should be avoided.

After several trips, meetings, and scheme presentations, a final design was approved.

Other questions remained, however. Would it be possible to complete construction by start of the 1991-92 school year? Should we hire a general contractor or a construction manager to oversee the job?

A construction manager serves as an extension of the owner and is a part of the team early on, offering expertise in cost estimating, construction scheduling, and design feasibility. This early involvement often brings substantial cost savings to the project, which are returned to the owner.

In contrast, a general contractor is brought on board well after architectural decisions have been made and completes the contract to the minimum requirements established by the bidding documents. Cost savings, if any, are disclosed to the owner, but are held by the general contractor.

We decided the only way to get into the new building on time would be to use the fast-track design/construction method. Therefore, it made sense to hire a construction manager. We selected Voss-Jorgensen-Schueler Co. of Waukesha who has a reputation of being on time and budget and working well with clients and subcontractors.

A ground-breaking ceremony was held on Oct. 19, 1990, after site preparation had been completed and the footings were ready to be poured.

Bid packages went out in four different stages. When bidding was completed, 50 out of 52 separate bid contracts came in well under budget. The construction went very smoothly throughout the year and on August 26, 1991, the doors opened to Evergreen Elementary School for the first day of classes, as scheduled. There were still some loose ends to tie up, but the building was substantially completed for student use.

On Oct. 20, 1991, one year and one day after the ground-breaking, our beautiful new building was dedicated. Because it had finished about $600,000 under budget, we were able to add a stage in the gymnasium, air conditioning, playground equipment, bleachers, computers for the new lab, and many other items.

Evergreen Elementary School was a labor of love for many dedicated people. Because they refused to listen to warnings of “it can’t be done,” Waterford’s children have the educational facilities they need and deserve. ☠