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Mt Lebanon High School Project Talk on Website

By Kaitlynn Riely

Conversation and debate about the planned Mt. Lebanon High School renovation project has been ubiquitous over the past two years.

It has taken place in school board and commission meetings, in town halls, on two citizen-run blogs, in coffee shops and on sidewalks. Now, as the district struggles to find cost savings to bring the project within its budget, there's a new venue for conversation and debate.

Lebodesign.net is a website recently launched by Mt. Lebanon resident Dan Rothschild to facilitate public input on the Mt. Lebanon High School project.

"None of us is as smart as all of us," he said. Mr. Rothschild said the best way to reduce costs was through a collaborative dialogue.

Mr. Rothschild, an 18-year Mt. Lebanon resident with four children in school or who have graduated in the district, has never been a blogger. But as president of Rothschild Doyno Collaborative, an architecture and urban design firm, he has design experience -- some with the high school project.

Two years ago, he was appointed by the school board to the Community Advisory Committee, which reviewed the design of the project and offered feedback.

Now, he hopes his blog, lebodesign.net, will provide a space for public feedback that's less cumbersome than a public meeting.



The conversation about the high school design was supposed to be over; but just as the district was preparing to break ground in April, it received bids that were much higher than expected, and postponed the groundbreaking indefinitely.

The entire project was intended to cost \$113.2 million. The lowest bid for construction, at \$102 million, was nearly \$16 million above the \$86.4 million estimate. The lowest bid for asbestos abatement was \$5.43 million, slightly below the \$6.15 million estimate.

Combined, the bids came in at \$15.28 million above the \$92.55 million estimate, a 16.5 percent gap. The project also includes \$20.7 million in estimated soft costs, which are costs other than direct construction, such as architectural, engineering, legal and permit fees.

Now the district, board, architects and construction manager are exploring design options to lower the cost of the

project; Mr. Rothschild wants the public to have another forum to offer opinions on the process.

Reducing costs by altering the design of the project is a difficult task, Mr. Rothschild said, but he doesn't want to accept a diminished project, which he thinks is where the school board is headed.

"They're so invested in the design that was selected, that they find it hard to modify the decisions they made, so what we are seeing now is just a wholesale reduction of the selected design, rather than an attempt to be creative and flexible," he said.

Bringing the project within budget is akin to completing an Olympic dive with a high degree of difficulty, he said.

"This is very, very hard. So my heart goes out to them," he said. "And they are trying very hard to solve this. I just think there needs to be more options."