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Local News

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Catholic high school an expensive dream

*West Bend supporters discuss what
is needed to make it a reality*

[By Cindy Crebbin](#)

Special to the Catholic Herald

WEST BEND — An Oct. 19 meeting at Holy Angels Parish hall brought together for the first time the anonymous donors of a parcel of land for a potential Catholic high school in Washington County, Capuchin Br. Bob Smith, director of Educational and Formational Services for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and president of Messmer High School and Preparatory School, John Stollenwerk, president of the Catholic School Advisory Board, and a group of about 16 Washington County Catholics who have been exploring the possibility of starting a local Catholic high school.

“The impetus for tonight’s meeting came from (the land donors),” said Br. Smith about the next step in determining the possibility of constructing what would be the 14th Catholic high school in the 10-county archdiocese.

This past February, a formal survey, commissioned by the archdiocese and prepared by Meitler Consultants, Inc., was sent to 3,116 Catholic families living in Washington, Dodge, Ozaukee and Sheboygan counties to gauge the feasibility of a Catholic high school in their area. Meitler completed its analysis of the survey results in March.

Stollenwerk, CEO of Allen-Edmonds, said, “The survey showed one of the biggest challenges is cost. You’re talking about a tuition-driven school. To compete with the public schools,” he continued, “including athletic fields and gyms, it’ll take \$15-20 million. Yes, it can be done, but it will not be easy. You’re talking about significant fund raising. And with the number of children in (Catholic) families dropping, you must reach out to non-Catholic families.”



In an interview with the Catholic Herald on Oct. 31, Br. Smith put the figure at “\$30-40 million” for a school that has all the amenities of recently-built public schools.

He said that the financial commitment doesn’t end there, as 70 to 80 percent of the annual budget would be needed for salaries and compensation. At the same time, he noted, a “tuition-driven” school would need to charge “\$7,000-\$8,000” tuition per student.

“Are there enough people willing to pay the premium it would take to open the school?” a participant asked, about the results of the Meitler survey.

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Stollenwerk, saying the survey was inconclusive in that respect; “It went right down the middle.”

During the interview, Br. Smith said the survey showed “interest among people with a large number of Catholic students in public schools.”

Of the responding families whose children are in public schools, a combined 42 percent said “definitely” or “likely” that a Catholic high school should be opened in the West Bend area. Forty-five percent were undecided.

Among families whose children are in Catholic schools, a combined 66 percent said “definitely” or “likely,” while 28 percent were undecided.

During the Catholic Herald interview, Br. Smith said, “The archdiocese is not looking at creating a school. Dominican and Thomas More (high schools) and several of our elementary schools have significant challenges. Our focus is going to be there.”

He noted that few archdiocesan high schools have opened in recent years. Rather, he said, other models, e.g., those run by boards comprised of clergy and laity where parents, students, staff, and alumni/ae see it as “their school,” are being considered, and need to be considered.

“Look at non-traditional models – 6-12 or K-12,” he said. “Look at a campus where all kids go to school.”

Br. Smith said that in a rural setting like the proposed West Bend site, a family with a 5-year-old, a 9-year-old and a freshman in high school might welcome the opportunity to drop off all of their children in one place.

“People will pay for what works,” he said.

Because of the financial commitment required to build and operate a school, Meitler sought data on family income. The data showed that “almost 90 percent of the survey respondents have family incomes above the national average. This

fact increases the likelihood that they can afford Catholic high school tuition,” according to the consultants. Thirty two percent of those responding noted incomes above \$100,000.

“This is an area that’s wealthy,” said Stollenwerk, “you got to find out where that money is. Start networking, go find the business people.”

Br. Smith added, “There are people in this community who are multimillionaires — if they’re touched, they’ll support the project.”

In the Catholic Herald interview, he said, “There’s money in that area. A question is, ‘Is there money for a Catholic school?’ Remember, the higher the tuition, the less appetite there is for the Catholic school.”

While businesses and foundations can be sources of revenue, Br. Smith said the biggest supporters of the Catholic school will most likely be people who believe in the value of and need for a Catholic high school.

“They are there,” he said, “but you have to find them.”

“You need commitment,” Stollenwerk said. “You need people not ashamed to go and ask for money. Talk to school leaders. If you have a high quality school, you’ll get kids.”

He advised the group to form a task force to investigate how other recently opened high schools got their start, to make appointments and visit these schools.

“What’s their budget, how many students, how many classrooms? Some schools are low overhead plants — steel buildings, public parks for their athletics,” Stollenwerk said.

He continued, “You need to look at the demographics — can people spend \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year?” Additionally, he said, consideration must be given to St. Mary’s Springs, to avoid negatively affecting this Fond du Lac County high school.

One of the concerns raised by those who had been exploring the possibility of a Catholic high school was that they hadn’t gotten the results of the Meitler report. Br. Smith and Stollenwerk promised it will be mailed to them. Others raised questions about what they perceived as lack of support from the archdiocese.

“Give us leadership, give us direction,” demanded one.

“But that’s what we’ve been doing,” replied Br. Smith. “We’re offering you our support and expertise. You don’t have to worry about our commitment to support you.”

“What does your support mean?” a participant asked, the tension level in the room noticeably increasing.

“I’m here,” said Br. Smith. “My being here shows my support.”

“We need ongoing support,” the participants told him. “We need direction on an ongoing basis. We need to know: Are we going in the right direction or are we just spinning our wheels?”

Br. Smith explained part of the problem had been with communication.

“We were unaware that a group was formed (in Washington County) and talking about this, until this past summer,” he said. “We can’t fix what happened, but we can move on. Communication needs to be the first step.”

The meeting ended with promises by Br. Smith and Stollenwerk to come back when the group needed to meet with them again.

Asked during the Catholic Herald interview if a Catholic high school would ever be built in Washington County, Br. Smith said 20 years ago Messmer had only “a 5 percent chance” of making it. Today, there are more than 1,000 students enrolled at the independent school’s two campuses.

“I never say, ‘It can’t happen,’” he said. “But until I see donors stepping up and giving, I see major challenges.” He added that supporters contributing “seven-figure gifts” would be needed.

Br. Smith said he admired the enthusiasm demonstrated by members of the exploratory group.

“They are committed, faithful people with a cause they believe in. It can happen,” he said. “Who’s to say that West Bend is not the next Messmer?”

Contributing to this story was Brian T. Olszewski in Milwaukee.

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