Dear Kim,
Here is my comment for the Towson High Section 106 community input. I tried to submit a longer comment through the online submission form but there were character limitations cutting off part of my response so I’m submitting it to you here. Please forward and include as my complete public comment.

Thanks,
Phoebe Evans Letocha

Comment:

My comment are based on my experience as a parent of 2 recent Towson High graduates and as someone with a historic preservation background. During the time my children were students at Towson High 2016-2022, the number of trailers doubled from 6 to 12. The school is overcrowded and has been since 2004 and desperately needs a solution that addresses the overcrowding and inadequate facilities. I’m grateful for the funding to plan a like new school. Classrooms in the main building are awkwardly configured. The late 1990s renovation was abysmal resulting in columns obstructing students views in science labs and other classrooms. The cafeteria is inadequate. The gym is inadequate, undersized and has problems with its HVAC so that both the heat and AC have to be run simultaneously. There is nothing historic worth preserving about the gym. The school would be better served with a entirely new gym and cafeteria.

The school does not have adequate athletic field space for the size of the school and quality of the athletic teams. The school lost use of one of its softball practice/JV fields due to the location of the trailers (fencing and dugout benches are still remnant.) The inadequate field space particularly impacts practice space for all teams and the ability of community recreation league to share the fields. The fields also flood and can become uneven and dangerous, especially the baseball
and soccer practice fields. The turf field is narrow and too close to the buffer for the steam. The foot bridge to the turf field is dangerous and inadequate as an escape route during emergencies.

The Section 106 review asks which parts of the original building that are critical to preserve. In my view, the architectural features that must be preserved are:

1. Cedar Ave front entrance with its art modern features, the lettering, the circle cut outs, the projecting entrance canopy.
2. The 5 story tower to the south of the entrance along Cedar Ave with its glass block windows pedagogical massing and linear feature important to the distinctive look of the building.
3. The auditorium entrance from the Aigburth side with its frieze above the auditorium 2nd floor windows, projecting entrance canopies that mirrors the Cedar Ave entrance, the art modern clock on the exterior wall.
4. The fieldstone and linear ribbon windows particularly along the Cedar Ave side. This type of fieldstone is a distinctive feature of Towson area buildings built in the early to mid 20th century and can be found in other historic properties including in the Stoneleigh Historic District, a neighborhood that feeds the school as well as downtown Towson. The back side of the building has been less accessible and rarely visible in viewing the exterior of the school as it is obstructed by the 1967 library addition, therefore it is less critical to preserve the visibility of the fieldstone and ribbon windows on that side should an addition be placed there.

While the mural painted on the wall is not original, nor does that wall need to be kept as it is from a later addition, I do think it is important to include a similar space in the new design where a mural of that size and scope can be painted by the students, with a new design every decade. It is a way to showcase public art by students
at a school with a strong tradition of a visual arts program.

I agree with the period of significance identified as 1947-1953. This version of Towson High was built to be an impressive school building in the county seat to serve a growing population. It was feed by neighborhoods that were built as street car suburbs starting in the 1920s as affluent white population started to flee the city of Baltimore for neighborhood with racially restricted covenants including Stoneleigh, Anneslie, Rogers Forge, Wiltondale, Southland Hills, and West Towson, some of which are themselves historic districts. By the late 1940s, growth in high school aged student body feed by this increased population necessitated a new school building for Towson High. It is important to note that Towson High was built as an all white high school at the same time that Carver High was built between York and Kennilworth to be the all Black high school in the Sandy Bottom neighborhood in the pre-Brown v Board era. In 1947 when both school buildings opened, little expense was spared for Towson High, while in contrast Carver was built in a utilitarian style. This difference documents the shameful Jim Crow practice where separate segregated facilities were not equal in quality and massing. Towson High was landmarked in 2006 at the same time as the earlier Carver School building on Lennox Ave in Historic East Towson, which had served as the school for Black students before the new Carver was built in Sandy Bottom.

Architectural features that do not need to be retained include:
1. The 1967 library addition along with the less substantial 1997 additions. These are outside the period of significance, and take up valuable real estate needed for a substantial new addition to the school.

2. Gym. Existing gym is inadequate and no historic integrity exist.

3. Cafeteria existing cafeteria is inadequate to school size, has
awkward layout with columns, and does provide good flow for food prep and serving stations.

The classrooms along the backside of the school could be completely rebuilt to accommodate the addition and construct 21st century learning spaces.

Some combination of B and C would best suit the needs of 21st century students and best comply with section 106 need for historic preservation. I also like the idea of a loop design with central courtyard to increase natural light and provide a secure outdoor common space.

The option of completely tearing down the building and rebuilding it next to the stream should be off the table as it will not receive permit approval from the Landmarks Preservation Commission. It would site the school too close to the stream which requires an adequate buffer. The stream floods the property after heavy rains, a concern given climate change, and flooding both up and down stream from the school. Such a placement will likely face opposition from environmental groups such as Green Towson Alliance due to concerns over the stream. The re-engineering required to flip the athletic fields to where the e siting building is located along a slope would also be expensive and challenging.

If at all possible, I strongly encourage that BCPS find a way to complete this project by moving all or a portion of the the students offsite during construction, similar to what was done for Stoneleigh Elementary when it’s addition/renovation was completed in 2012-2013. BCPS needs a school swing space, particularly given all the upcoming construction projects in coming years.

I do serve as a commissioner on the Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission. My comments here are in my capacity as
a private citizen and not in my capacity as a member of the LPC.

Phoebe Evans Letocha

Sent from my iPad