

# Towson High's status queried

Advocates for new school say ending landmark listing would smooth the path

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Some members of a group advocating construction of a new Towson High School are exploring the possibility of taking the current historic school building off the county's landmarks list, a move they say could make it easier and cheaper to either renovate or replace the building.

Towson resident Steve Prumo, a founding member of New in '22 — a group of parents and community members calling for a new Towson High by 2022 — believes removing landmark status would allow school officials to make changes to the 1940s-era stone building without the approval of the county's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Generally, landmark status requires review and approval by the commission for substantive changes at historic properties.

"Delisting [from the landmarks list] would give the project maximum flexibility both from an architectural standpoint and a financial standpoint," Prumo wrote on the group's Facebook page. In a subsequent interview, he added, "I feel more of an allegiance to the kids that are going to go there, and I feel more of an allegiance to their future, than I do to the current structure."

Landmarks Preservation Commission member Carol Allen, however, said stripping a building of its landmark status is "not

a real possibility." Taking a site off the list, she said, would mean "that every building listed in Baltimore County is in jeopardy. It's just not going to happen."

Prumo said the idea has support from some other members of New in '22, and last month he met with county historic preservation planner Teri Rising and Don Mohler, chief of staff for County Executive Kevin Kamenetz, to discuss it.

Ellen Kobler, a county spokeswoman, described the meeting as "purely informational."

Kamenetz, who is closing out his second term as executive and is a Democratic candidate for governor, said he would include planning money for two new area high schools in a budget that will be unveiled this month. The county Board of Education said in January it would seek \$15 million in the coming fiscal year to plan for two new Towson-area high schools.

Advocates for Towson High, as well as supporters for a new Dulaney High in Timonium, have been among the most vocal in asking Baltimore County Public Schools to replace aging facilities.

In a 2014 facilities assessment, Towson High scored a 2.36 out of 5, the third-lowest score for a high school in the county. The school was built to hold 1,260 students, and a February school system report projects that by 2022, it will be more than 600 students over capacity.

The original five-level stone Towson High structure was built in 1949. It was designated a historic landmark in 2006 by the Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Under its landmark designation, the school system may alter newer parts of the building, but would need approval from the preservation commission to do anything to the historic stone structure and its facade, Allen said.

Demolition of properties on the list will be considered only if the demolition is "more important than the loss of part of the county's heritage," according to the commission's website.

County law indicates that to take a property off the list, the owner of the building — the school system — would have to request that the preservation commission recommend it be removed. After a public hearing process, the County Council would then vote on whether to remove it.

This month the school system will conduct a draft site analysis with a "preliminary historical assessment with the Maryland Historical Trust," according to its website.



Not everyone agrees taking the building off the preservation list is necessary.

Phoebe Evans Letocha, a Towson High parent who leads another group pressing for improvements at the school, believes a smaller school with a neighborhood feel is a better goal than a new 1,800-seat facility. She advocates exploring redistricting to achieve a smaller student body.

She said her group wants an open, transparent discussion of all options on the table, and has serious concerns about taking Towson High off the landmark list.

“Landmarks are designated landmarks for a reason,” Evans Letocha said. “If you start going back and delisting, it defeats the whole purpose of preservation.”

*Reporter Margarita Cambest contributed to this article.*