

SOUTH PARK MIDDLE SCHOOL:
Structural Engineering Report Misportrays Presence
of Asbestos in Main SP Building

FYI: The author of this Reply to the CSF Structural Engineering Report is an attorney who graduated SPHS in 1967, and was a part of a tour of the Main Building and Gym on June 12, 2007. As an attorney, I have previously analyzed structural engineering reports in handling mold cases as part of my law practice. I note at the outset that most such reports detail figures which are used to calculate the cost of the amount of work to be done. This is the first time that I have seen a Report with no cost of work figures.

After thorough study of the CSF Engineers Structural Engineering Report, I offer these comments:

- 1) The transmittal letter states that if BISD intends “to retain the historical appearance...it could become more costly and difficult to renovate.” This is not necessarily true, since inclusion in the National Historical Registry makes the building eligible for both public and private grant money, thereby replacing tax dollars, and making maintenance easier on taxpayers, not harder. This golden opportunity has not been discussed at any BISD public meeting yet.

- 2) The ‘outside firm’ chosen to do the Report, CSF Engineers, was chosen by 3D/I, which had already nodded toward demolition, and may be in a position to potentially profit. If BISD wanted an impartial, independent report, Lamar University is just up the street from South Park M.S., and has an Engineering School, as well as many students needing hands-on experience who graduated from BISD.

- 3) What reinforces this conclusion is that, unlike most structural engineering reports, no dollars and cents figures are mentioned in the CSF Report released to the public. Further, the Report appears to be hastily prepared on a word processor because unrelated parts of the Report concerning different buildings contain identical descriptive passages with the same grammatical errors. Such ‘beefing up’ of the Report occurs more than once.

As an example, in the SUMMARY, p. 2, for the Homemaking Cottage, we see: “components are adequate to continue to support the service loads imposed them by the intended use of the building.” An identical phrase appears on p. 3 for the Music Building, again missing the preposition “on” before “them.”

4) The report also contains numerous caveats that it may be inaccurate or incomplete:

p. 2: "...since we were unable to directly observe the structural components behind the finish materials, we reserve the right to revise our conclusions based on...new or additional information."

p. 7: "The information in this section of the report was obtained through review of incomplete sets of construction plans. Therefore, the accuracy of the descriptions below is limited to the accuracy and detail of the construction drawings that were available to us..."

p. 9: "We were provided with partial sets of...drawings..."

pp. 13-14: "...we see no evidence...building cannot continue to safely support the service loads imposed on it...However, since we were unable to directly observe..., we reserve the right to revise our conclusions based on...new or additional information..."

p. 15: "...conditions described above indicate...problems related to indoor environmental control as well as problems with the general building envelope. Unfortunately, these issues are beyond the scope of our knowledge and practice."

5) The report claims to be based on interviews with maintenance personnel, some of whom accompanied the writer during inspection of the premises. I learned from talking to some of the same personnel shortly afterwards, and to others who had some direct responsibility for the building previously, that the Report may inaccurately portray the actual status of some matters:

A. Asbestos in the Main Building (facing Highland Ave.):

The June 21, 2007 Transmittal Letter from 3D/I, discussing the Main Building, states:

"Another potentially major cost factor is the hazardous material and asbestos remediation needed for a renovation project versus demolition abatement for the same building. These costs can significantly increase the overall project cost as well."

If you read the Report carefully, it never states that there is asbestos in the Main Building. (All pertinent excerpts are set out below.)

I personally spoke with the carpenter who is normally assigned to SPMS, and he said that the only asbestos still of concern in the Main Building that he knew of, was in the glue which had been used to hold down the old floor tiles, and was still there under the new tiles which were not asbestos. My other responsible sources indicated all asbestos insulation around pipes had long since been removed.

This suggests that the glue or mastic used to hold down the now discarded asbestos tiles, to the extent it could not be readily removed, still holds asbestos fibers much like a fly encased in amber. In other words, the minimal asbestos left is contained, but as steady wear sometimes occasions, has a potential of becoming airborne in the distant future, should the new tiles be allowed to become brittle or friable.

The BISD Board had at one point directed that friable asbestos tiles at the old French High School (later Central Ninth, and now Smith) be contained by a hard floor wax buildup on the floors. However, since the SPMS situation is already largely mitigated, a continuous sheet of decorative vinyl flooring extending between all floorboards would eliminate any problem still encountered. No fibers can become airborne if they are encased. Such vinyl flooring is now cheap, highly durable, and stain removable. It can also be found in patterns which resemble the historic wood flooring at SPHS without extra cost.

I do not dispute the presence of asbestos in the Music Building as reported. Notwithstanding, the Report uses that fact to infer that there may be asbestos in the Main Building, which is probably incorrect other than as mentioned above:

p. 9 [discussing Music Building]: "...he floors inside the building are covered with carpet, vinyl tile, and asphalt tile (usually containing asbestos). The ceilings throughout the building were originally 12" x 12" paper acoustic ceiling tile in the main rooms and asbestos board in the mechanical rooms...The mechanical room ceilings are still covered with asbestos board..." [Page 11 repeats these findings.]

p. 5: "1953:The interior of the Main Building was renovated to match the interior finishes of the new Music Building."

p. 20 [Music Building]: "It is apparent that the Main Building was renovated at the time that the Music Building was constructed. therefore, most of the finishes inside these buildings are of similar age and composition...."

p. 4, Item 11: "We visually observed materials inside the Music Building that contain asbestos. Based on the age and renovation history of the other two buildings, it is likely that they contain asbestos as well. Therefore, if the buildings are renovated, abatement of asbestos...could be a factor in renovation cost."

p. 17 [discussing Main Building]: “This building is relatively old and has been renovated at least a few times in the past. Since the time this building was constructed, various construction materials that were once commonly used have been regarded as unsafe for building occupants. Therefore, if the building is renovated, abatement of such materials could be a factor in the planning and renovation cost.”

Please note with regard to this last paragraph, the same thing could be said of most Gothic Cathedrals, WPA buildings, courthouses, etc. Also, attorneys refer to this process of generating false assumptions: “smoke and mirrors.”

Reserving to myself the same possibility of being wrong as the report writer, as a former student, I would say that since much of the interior space in the Main Building is functional (such as student lockers which line all hallways), the 1953 facelift CSF speaks of probably applies largely to decorative finishes such as door facings, cornices, etc. Even the old chalkboards have long since been replaced in the Main Building. I was also an orchestra student familiar with the Music Building, as well, and other than decorative touches, I doubt the comparison. For example, we still had the old porcelain water fountains in the Main Building, when the water fountain in the Music Building was far more modern.

Therefore, I submit that, excluding janitor’s closets and backstage areas in the auditorium with which I am unfamiliar, asbestos in the Main Building is now largely, if not fully, mitigated. I have seen different colored floor tiles in the janitor’s closets, but I am uncertain what their composition is.

6) Main Building: Paint cracking or peeling, fungus, and the suggestion that all windows be replaced (Report, p. 15).

On June 12, 2007, I spoke with the BISD painter who, in all previous school years but from June, 2006 until June, 2007, had been assigned to upkeep on the SPMS and one other school’s grounds. He basically confirmed my belief that BISD had been letting the Main Building and other campus buildings go. He had not been allowed to work at SPMS for the year since June, 2006, and until after the inspection(s) were completed. He reported having actually done some painting at BISD’s Village Creek camp during that time, although it had been closed for 2-3 years.

Report, Main Building, p. 14: “...We observed cracked and peeling paint on many of the walls...The paint has most likely cracked and peeled due to age

....mainly on the exterior walls, or on the interior walls close to the exterior walls.”

This means simply that the old paint is in worse condition where it is more exposed to the elements. Paint and plaster are peeling at isolated spots in the stairwells which get more sunlight. Apparently, the windows in the stairwells leak around their base due to their not having been replaced circa 1984-85 when most other Main Building windows were. There are a few other leaky windows, -some logically near where fire escapes attach to the building, -but the 1984-85 dark tinted windows help control the building temperature. I doubt that one could make them much darker, -but at times of year when that might be necessary, it could be done without replacing the windows, by using sun-screening devices to attain optimal temperatures. As far as the paint on the fire escapes, they were last refurbished in 1974. They have been let go and must be replaced. A child who tried to slide down them now would be cut by rusty metal.

A. Fungus among us

Report, based on personnel interviews, p. 6: “The Main Building has had problems with fungus growing on the walls inside the building.”

Report, Inspection Observations, Main Bldg., p. 10: “A few isolated areas of fungal growth on walls.”

To begin, Beaumont sits on the 30th parallel, which means we are in the Tropics. Our swampy area of the Gulf Coast also attracts fungus and mold. Nonetheless, if the Main Building had problems with mold in the past, it would have been between 1974 and the mid-1980’s, when it had a water-cooled air conditioning system, replete with a water tower next to the Shop Building, as opposed to the dryer central air which replaced it. Since the Main Building is at least 85% masonry in construction, it may have taken it a little while to dry back out.

There was recently (within last 2 years) a pipe which burst on the second floor on the North end of the Main Building which caused mold in one upstairs and one downstairs classroom. But those rooms have been renovated, and classes are now being held in them.

The Report, p. 11, also states that the Home Economics Building has: “Fungus on the plaster walls in the northwest bathroom.” That is logical, since that building has not been greatly in use for some time, and may have been closed up during that time. It has also been without climate control during that period, has a stucco exterior, and sits over standing water, according to the Report.

Incidentally, the Report very accurately notes that water now drains back toward the buildings on campus, rather than away from them. The failure to maintain campus drainage has also been true of the Bingman Elementary campus in the recent past. Bud Hebert at one time had the ‘football field’ level and draining well at Bingman, but that ceased to be a concern long before the field was scrapped. The BISD personnel who mow now also do not pick up litter before they mow. Instead, their mowers convert it to confetti, and turn the aluminum cans into a razor sharp mine field for Little Leaguers. BISD’s long-term neglect of campus drainage is yet another sign they have been letting this campus go downhill.

7) Termites

Termites have eaten the wood flooring along the outer wall in Room 310, and were also found on a window sill in an adjacent room. The infested flooring has now been torn out and the area sprayed. During the process, it was discovered that two water pipes formerly had come up through the middle of the infested area.

The termites were subterranean and had to have come up from the ground. No infestation was found on the floors below. Therefore, a highly plausible scenario is that the termites traveled up waterpipes (possibly inside the spire on the North side of the stairs) before disembarking at the third floor. There are no signs of other damage, and the building is at least 85% masonry construction. Termites will have a hard time finding anything to eat other than the flooring on the second and third floors.

8) Miscellaneous

A better construction history of the roof of the Main Building is needed, as well as details of whether it might have some slope from build-up. I think it may have been attended to somehow in the mid-1980’s. Also, the parapet wall on said roof has long slits in it at roof level for drainage, which are visible from the grounds. Water does stand on some of the other buildings behind the Main Building, but even stains on inside ceiling tiles are not prolific on the third floor of the Main Building.

The June 21st transmittal letter contains this gobbledygook: “We feel that the former [replacement of roof covering rather than build a new roof] would be more costly due to potentially costly unknowns...until the work is started.”

Finally, some observations. Because the Main Building has been granted Historic Preservation status, the Board and Bond Committee now have all the time in the world to contemplate possibilities. Demolition is unnecessary because there is an unscathed 1 and ½ acres behind the school to build new buildings on, and, football games already being played several blocks away at Lamar U's field, there is more room than that. As a former teacher, however, I do not favor tearing down football stadiums because the opportunity to play football or be in a marching band, has kept many a student from dropping out.

Also, the porcelain fixtures in the bathrooms of most BISD schools are ancient. I did my Juris Doctor on prison overcrowding and sentencing guidelines in 1987. In the process, I studied prison construction, and I found that numerous factors, including cost overruns by contractors, were making prisons more expensive to build. But, one of the biggest increases was the price of toilets and lavatories. The reason they only have stainless steel toilets, etc., in prisons now is because porcelain cannot be disinfected for the AIDS virus. To top it off, staph is now resistant or immune to most anti-bacterial agents. There needs to be sunlight in South Park's bathrooms, as well as stainless steel fixtures. They cost at least four times what porcelain costs, but this is something which needs to happen even if you do nothing else to these buildings.

The Main Building has now been approved for Federal Historic Preservation status, and there may even be a Congressman who graduated from there who can lend a helping hand in securing grant money. Even so, BISD can build forever on the back of their block before they need to decide what to do with a structurally sound front building, -which also is the only decent storm shelter still in that part of town (on the only street that does not flood, as well).

Not having to grade CSF's Report, it is better simply to say that it contains some internal inconsistencies, and obscures about as much as it sheds light on. But the lack of any figures, the tortured conclusions, and the fact it obviously was not proofread, lead me to wonder whether Truth was not the first casualty. (I was also delighted to learn that the plural of "roof" is "roofs." There are some things which Spell-Check simply cannot catch!)

Yours truly,
Jack Lawrence

“South Park” took its name from a 1-room schoolhouse built circa 1891 at Adams Street and Port Arthur Road (now M.L.K.), and was so-named by J. F. Kline, a co-founder of its school system. A 12-room building was completed in 1908 on Highland Avenue, which later became part of Pietzsch Elementary. South Park I.S.D. was created by the Act of March 15, 1913, 33rd Legislature, R.S., Senate Bill 332. The 3-story building now known as South Park Middle School was completed, and opened in September, 1923, as South Park High School (lower 2 floors), and South Park Junior College (top floor). The College’s first newspaper was the S’Park Plug; its name changed to The Redbird in 1932, when the college became Lamar Junior College. The high school’s paper was “The Gusher.” The 1923 campus also included a trade school and a home economics cottage. The ball teams were called the “Parkers” until the late 1920’s, when they became the “Greenies.” The mascot later became a statue of a large elf clad in green, whose name was “Sparky.” South Park High School became a Middle School in 1986.