

**ACTON-BOXBOROUGH REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT  
School Building Committee (SBC) Approved Minutes**

R.J. Grey Junior High School Library  
15 Charter Road, Acton, MA 01720

August 9, 2017  
7:00 p.m.

*Members Present:* Marie Altieri, Mary Brolin, Peter Berry, Jason Cole, Bob Evans, JD Head, Lynne Newman, Katie Raymond, Damian Sugrue

*Members Absent:* Rob Bukowski, Brian Griffin, Ted Kail, Adam Klein, Amy Krishnamurthy, Steve Mielke, Maria Neyland, Mac Reid, Chris Whitbeck

*Other:* Karen Coll

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1. **Call to Order** - Mary Brolin called the meeting to order at 7:03pm. Mary noted that, with Kristina's resignation, a new chair will need to be identified.
  2. **Minutes** - Damian moved, JD seconded, and the minutes of the 7/12/17 SBC meeting were unanimously approved.

Approved minutes from the Working Group meetings held on 6/20/17, 7/5/17 and 7/19/17 were shared with the committee by email prior to this meeting.

### 3. **Issues Review**

#### a) **Prior site assessment review, including wastewater/wetlands issues and Conant feasibility**

JD reported to the committee that representatives from Dore & Whittier had come to the last working group meeting. They had emphasized that the feasibility process is the time to really examine sites in detail, and we want to be sure we have enough funds upfront for a full evaluation. D&W will update their cost estimates on the two options currently under discussion. Option A is similar to one of their original options but Option B is different.

One question was whether the Conant site might be at least as good an option as Gates. The current Conant property has wetlands constraints, and JD discovered a brook bisecting the Conant site that shows up on the town's GIS system but is not labeled as wetlands on state or other systems. This brook has a 75-foot no-build restriction on either side. However, we might be able to identify a large enough buildable section, and there are two ball fields adjacent to Conant; they are owned by the town but we might be able to reacquire the land. One, McPherson Field, might have enough dry land for building; the other, Hart Field, is wetter. We could potentially trade some Douglas land back to the town for these fields.

Douglas and Gates are listed as two separate parcels of land. The MSBA rates its caps on per-parcel basis, so it might be more advantageous to look at the Douglas and Gates sites combined. The Army Corps of engineers owns the bridge between Douglas and Gates. In our assessments, we will see if there are ways to manage, and even improve, traffic and congestion at the Douglas/Gates site

A third potential option could be the Arlington Street property, especially if we can use a standalone wastewater system.

Jason suggested that we identify publicly our first-choice option, with the caveat that we will investigate other options if this one falls through.

#### **b) Preschool/Central Office solutions**

D&W is looking at cost estimates that will take the preschool into account. We might also be able to address Central Office space as part of the reimbursable study to look at options for moving the preschool out of the Admin building. The general thought at this point is to include the preschool in any new building plans, but the Central Office will stay in the Admin building. We might be able to relocate the Central Office around vacated preschool space

#### **c) Additional cost estimate(s)**

Jason will work with JD to update the CIP and scope package. The most recent scope package was priced at approximately \$14M. The time horizon may depend on specific projects.

### **4. Discussion of Available Land – Additional Analysis**

There might be parcels worth looking at if they were to become available, such as an unused public building, space near the post office or NARA, possibly even some land on Harris Street. We might not be able to use these sites for this project but possibly as options for future planning. Some commercial sites could work, but we might need to take them by eminent domain. Katie has looked at potential parcels, but most have been ruled out as unavailable or unusable. There is not a feasible way to exhaustively search every potential parcel, including all those that are not owned by the town or the school district. Anything that has been set aside for conservation would have to be released by state. The School Street property, which is owned by the prison, is locked down by a conservation overlay. Katie has looked at the town GIS and determined that there is nothing else that appears to be suitable. As a result, we are continuing to focus on the school parcels as well as, possibly, the Arlington Street property.

The working group felt it wouldn't be feasible to build the new building in Boxborough, because that would locate three out of six elementary schools in Boxborough and would, among other issues, put us out of line with our hometown guarantee.

### **5. Update on Additional Analysis – OPM/Design Funds**

We might have been overestimating our funding needs for Phase I, as we were originally thinking we would need \$1.7M. We are still trying to understand what other districts have done, but our district is different from most. Katie has seen other projects with Phase I costs in the \$750K - \$1M range. Our projected request, at \$1.3M - \$1.5M, is higher than that, but not many other projects include a twin elementary school for 900 students. We will wait to get updated cost estimates from D&W. Marie is hoping we can be ready to make a final decision before the next Building Committee meeting.

Members were reminded that if we request more than we spend on Phase I, we can roll the excess into the next phase of the project. Going higher upfront is more conservative and allows us adequate flexibility to do a thorough site evaluation. If we undercut ourselves, we run the risk of encountering unknown issues during construction, as we did when we discovered large amounts of ledge on the PDB site. We need to do proper work in the feasibility phase, and it's worth making sure we have enough funding. If we don't spend it all, the town-funded portion will go back into E&D.

JD noted that, based on current information, a new building can best be built on the Gates site while the current building is standing. If we build on the Conant property, D&W has said that we would have to

phase in the construction, which would add to the cost. We need to pay attention to phasing, as well as any impact on the school and community.

Members questioned whether it might be possible to take all the kids out of one school and move them elsewhere for a year while a building was razed and rebuilt. Anything is an option, even double sessions in one building, but it might be expensive, disruptive, and not educationally sound.

Katie said that we can't really identify which site is our best option until we do a thorough feasibility study. Gates looks preferred now, but we haven't even done a perk test there in 40 years; maybe it would be worth doing a perk test on the site, which would cost about \$500. If Gates works but the workarounds are overly expensive we need to identify another choice. If we could build at Conant without having to phase in the project, that could be a good solution. Conant has good access from Route 2, and doesn't bring all the traffic through West Acton.

The Arlington Street property could be a good option even though it didn't perk when it was under consideration for a senior center; we could use a closed wastewater system if our preferred property doesn't perk. Arlington Street is also walkable from some Acton neighborhoods, including Indian Village and Patriot's Hill, which would be a positive, but the neighbors came out in force to oppose building a senior center on that property a few years ago. JD said that there are vernal pools with 100-foot buffers around them on the Arlington Street site, but there is a lot of land there so we might be able to carve out a buildable section.

In general, it would be better to provide as much clarity as possible about the location to the public, but we have to be careful about getting locked into a position that might not work out. For now, we will continue to identify the Gates property as our most likely site but will clarify that we are also looking at other sites, including Conant, as backups.

MSBA requires that we have town approval to proceed. We could draw on our E&D fund to cover the cost of design/OPM without calling special town meetings, but we need to secure town meeting votes to meet this MSBA requirement. Using funds from our E&D account will require a 50% majority vote at town meeting, compared with a 2/3 majority if we were to fund it with a bond. Members suggested asking for \$1.3M, which is the more conservative estimate from D&W. We will probably need to seek town approval for the full amount of the project, not just the reimbursed portion, with language included about anticipated reimbursement

Next month, we will discuss the site further, including how much money to request.

## **6. Update on DMPRC Recommended Options**

Marie reviewed the current draft of the summary document for special town meetings. The first page is a high-level summary; the next two pages go into more detail about each of the two options. If we request \$1.3M for the design/OPM phase, the cost to the district would be \$710K, to be drawn from our E&D fund. We have an initial reimbursement rate from the MSBA for the feasibility phase, but we will get another rate for construction. We could get credit for factors such as LEED, but we are not sure yet what this rate will be. The biggest caveat is that we are allowed a "percentage of allowable costs" which will not cover the extra costs of an overly high-end 'Taj Mahal.'

Option A, a twin school with two K-6 elementary schools, would meet expected enrollment projections. A downside is that it's big. Each school would hold 420-450 students; in addition, eight preschool classes would be housed in the building. By including the preschool classes, about 80 children, this option would be larger than the corresponding D&W model.

Option B is more complicated; it is also a twin school, with one elementary school and a preschool-kindergarten ECC. It is smaller than A and likely to cost less. In this model, every elementary school would give up kindergarten and become grades 1-6. At this point, most elementary schools have about 480 students, and about 70 kindergarten students would move from each school to the new ECC. Option B would still have six schools but they would be reconfigured to be five elementary schools plus an ECC. Members noted that we would need to specify to the public that we would be consolidating from six elementary schools to five.

Advantages of Option A include:

- Preschool students would be more integrated into the elementary schools, including art, music and gym.
- Option A may be educationally better, but is more expensive.
- Because it would not eliminate an existing school program, it would be easier to explain and support. Option B could run the risk of alienating a school community that is committed to maintaining their current program.

Option B has the advantages of an ECC, including

- More flexibility in the mix of half day and full day kindergarten,
- Ensuring that we know the students before they move to elementary school. Currently, we have no background information on incoming kindergarten students or their needs. Parents would still choose schools, but at 1<sup>st</sup> grade not kindergarten.
- Housing kindergarten with the preschool would provide more supports for kindergartners who need them.
- It's smaller and more "right-sized" for our community.

Assuming that the new building would be built on the Gates property, under Option B we would reduce Douglas and Gates to two sections at every grade between now and when the school opens so that four sections move into new building, and we would keep all other schools at three sections in every grade. Conant currently has some grades with two sections, which would be rebuilt to three sections.

Members suggested that we change the wording on the first page to clarify that the twin school will house either two PreK-6 elementary schools (not K-6), or an ECC for all district preschool and kindergarten classes plus a Grades 1-6 elementary school. Regardless of whether the preschool is merged into an ECC, Joe Gibowicz will continue to coordinate the program. Members liked the term "host site" in the Option B description, which shows that we haven't determined a final site yet.

The School Committee will make the ultimate decision about what to present at town meeting. The draft proposal will be presented to them at their August 24<sup>th</sup> meeting. Jason felt that if we did not offer a plan that was fairly concrete we could face increased concerns at town meeting. Members discussed what recommendations to make to the committee. Option A was generally favored as it was viewed as clearer and seeming to make more sense. One reason to support A is to eliminate concerns of voters about the elimination of a school program.

Jason Cole moved that we adopt Option A as the preferred option without ruling out Option B, Bob Evans seconded, and it was unanimously

**VOTED** to recommend to SC that we present Option A as our preferred Option.

Mary, Marie and Jason will explain this to the School Committee on August 24<sup>th</sup>.

## 7. Timeline – Outreach Efforts

Mary noted that we need to educate people in advance of town meeting. People need to understand the issues as well as any potential impact on taxes. The feasibility study will have no direct affect on taxes since we will be taking money out of E&D, but we are still using town resources. While we are not proposing to fund this through a new tax levy, the district’s capital budget will be higher than it would be otherwise. This project is dealing with long-term liabilities. We haven’t built a new building in 19 years.

We haven’t developed a timeline yet and need to look at constraints such as Back to School Nights. Mary will work with Beth to identify some day and evening times for public events, hopefully by early October. We could hand out flyers at Back to School Nights, and we could adjust Back to School Night start times to bring parents in a little early for presentations about the building project.

Members discussed whether we need to do a survey. The survey conducted last spring, which was really more of a focus group, only got responses from about 250 people. The hope was to do more outreach beginning in September and to have some decisions made by mid-October. If we identify a preferred option, it could help us be more focused in our requests for feedback. We may not want to specify a site on a survey, which could be too neighborhood specific and potentially polarizing.

We will need a flyer and information sheet for our next meeting on September 13<sup>th</sup>. Karen will share the Canva flyer developed by Kristina with Damian and Lynne. Katie Neville may also be able to help develop these materials. D&W also suggested creating a video showing the need for new facilities, especially looking at the current condition of Douglas and the preschool.

Marie mentioned that we will eventually need a ballot committee, separate from the schools, to promote the project. That committee should be forming now to start planning. Marie will explain more about the ballot committee and questions at the next Building Committee meeting.

## 8. Adjourn

Jason Cole moved, JD Head second, and the motion to adjourn was unanimously approved at 8:34pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen H. Coll

Documents Used:

- Agenda
- Minutes from 7/12/17 Meeting
- Revised Overview of Information for Special Town Meetings

**Next Meetings:** Sept 13, Oct 11, Nov 8, Dec 13