

Tm 5/18/16

PLEASE VOTE YES ON 38!

Unless we Vote Yes on Article 38 today, Town Meeting members and Amherst voters will face a Fall vote on a large, expensive new 2nd-6th grade elementary school--without careful consideration of 2 viable (and potentially cheaper) alternatives using existing school buildings. If the Fall votes pass, Amherst's neighborhood K-6th elementary schools will end--a grade change and loss of neighborhood elementary schools not supported by most elementary parents--nor, it seems, elementary school teachers. A detailed renovation option for Wildwood and Fort River schools was not considered, nor the option of using the under-enrolled Middle School for elementary school students.

How did we get here?

Last June, I first raised **the option of looking at putting elementary students in the middle school** with a central administrator. I suggested making the middle school into a K-8 school, as in Brookline (which has both K-8 and K-6 schools) and the Bement School, which is pre-K to 9th grade. My kids went to the Bement School for middle school and I saw many academic, leadership and social benefits to keeping middle school students with younger students. To accommodate younger students a new classroom wing could be added to the middle school, a school with excellent, underutilized facilities. It has a big gym, a pool, art rooms, courtyards, band practice space, music practice rooms, a big cafeteria, courtyards, an auditorium and a greenhouse. The middle school has held up to 1,000 students but now has only 440 students.

The new wing could be paid out of town funds. Then, at Fort River, a renovated or new school could be built--with the state picking up half the cost. Preschool classrooms could be added to all 3 schools, giving the town 3 neighborhood schools with elementary students in great condition--at what likely will be the cheapest overall cost and greatest sustainability. An extra wing on the middle school could even cheaply accommodate the reconfigured 2nd-6th grades. Other parents asked about using the middle school and I raised the option several times.

Why wasn't this middle school option considered?

Administrators incorrectly thought the Regional Agreement prevented younger students from using the middle and high school regional buildings and it would take a 4-town vote to change to the Regional Agreement to make this happen. This statement was repeated on Facebook pages and FAQs. Over and over, in meetings with the Amherst School Committee, central administrators, the Wildwood Rebuilding Committee, and at the 7-12 Revisioning Summit, people were told elementary students could not use the middle school.

This is simply incorrect. Nothing in the Regional Agreement prevents older or younger kids (or adults) from using the regional buildings. Older students now use the middle school for GCC classes and 6th graders were there. So this option was not considered by central administrators, Amherst School Committee or the Wildwood Rebuilding Project *before* choosing the grade reconfiguration, a preK-1st grade Crocker Farm and the large 2-wing new school at Wildwood.

I also think that once the central administrators settled on their favorite option--it was almost impossible emotionally go back and objectively examine other options. People tend

to dig into positions. When presented with evidence that contradicts their position, it usually only serves to reinforce the original position. (Let me gently suggest we see this effect in our own Town Meeting debates.) As late as this past month, a central administrator criticized the middle school option since because the building didn't have enough classrooms on the first floor for younger students. The administrator had never noticed the option included a new separate classroom wing for younger kids.

The process itself did not lead to full, vigorous consideration of alternatives. Almost all of the original members of the Wildwood Rebuilding project committee, which included the Superintendent, are district or town employees. **Until the Fall of 2015, very few elementary school parents knew Fort River could be closed and Amherst's K-6 neighborhood schools ended.** That spring, elementary parents had been sent a 2 page letter starting off with the sentence: "We would like to share information about the Wildwood School Building Project in advance of Community Forums that will be occurring on this topic when we return in the fall." If I were still a Fort River parent, I would have stopped right there, thinking it didn't involve my kids. Apparently many parents did exactly this.

The first page went onto say the Wildwood School Rebuilding Committee "emphasized needing a designer who places a priority on community input and has a proven track record of facilitating sessions to engage the broader public into the process...." **It mentioned Community Forums in fall, 2015 "to gather input on the best option for this project. This will be a thorough process with many opportunities for public input."** It wasn't until page 2 did the option of closing Fort River completely, reconfiguring all grades and ending Crocker Farm as a K-6 neighborhood school appeared. Again, most parents missed this information and no other information was sent to them until the fall.

(I think it's worth stopping here to say that yesterday I received an automatic robo call announcing the Annual Black Scholars Rising Celebration (May 24, 2016 from 6:30-8:30 pm in this auditorium). I received a separate email on this event and found a brightly colored leaflet at school. Each week, I receive an email and newsletter from the Superintendent, one from the high school PGO. I get a variety of school robo calls on both my cell and home phones and about 20 paper letters and announcements each year. The schools know how to reach me.)

In the fall when most parents found out the preferred option was closing all the neighborhood elementary schools, reconfiguring all grades and building a new large 2-wing Wildwood, extra meetings and a survey were added. (See list provided by the District.) Parents and community members were told their ideas would be considered carefully. Instead, their suggestions often were immediately criticized as impractical, expensive, not promoting equity, etc.

What was lost by this poor process and consideration of alternatives? Careful analysis and vetting. Instead of asking: "How could this option work?" administrators seemed only to knock options down, pointing out one negative after another.

Article 38 asks for an open, thorough and hard look at the budget numbers for different options to keep Amherst's neighborhood elementary schools--and to utilize the school buildings we have--goal supported by many elementary parents and citizens.

Janet McGowan
Precinct 8