

Amherst School Committee Statement – Article 1

As a town, we have an opportunity to accept state money to rebuild schools that will advance our children's education for years to come. The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) has agreed to fund over \$34 million dollars toward the cost of these new schools, and the town has signed a contract with the MSBA for this building. We have until March 31st to secure the town's share of the funding. If we do not, the state money is lost. We have written confirmation from the MSBA (see attached letter, document A) that there is absolutely no guarantee when we will receive state money again, or for how much.

This means a future project will cost our taxpayers millions of dollars more, and we will be missing an opportunity to address the educational and health needs of our community's children in the immediate future.

One aspect of the proposed new building that has raised much public debate is the grade reconfiguration. After months of consideration (see attached statement, document B), the Amherst School Committee voted in January 2016 to reconfigure our schools for many reasons: increased teacher collaboration, equalizing and maintaining small class size, eliminating redistricting, operational savings, and, most compellingly, educational fairness.

Bottom line, the School Committee voted to support the reconfiguration of the elementary schools because the mission of our schools directs us to provide all children with access to the best public education the town can offer. For years, the community has demanded that we address glaring inequalities in educational outcomes — the achievement gap. The new reconfiguration will allow for an expanded preschool, adding 30 additional seats primarily for children who cannot now afford to attend preschool. The committee made a commitment at their January 2016 meeting to provide these additional seats for low-income families and include them in ongoing budgets.

Reconfiguration would eliminate regular redistricting that may occur to address overcrowded schools or to achieve socio-economic balance between the elementary schools. Crocker Farm, for example, is badly overcrowded and some students will need to be redistricted in the next couple of years. But, while redistricting in our current model impacts all students, it is some of the most vulnerable students who are bused to different buildings every year based on their socio-economic status or special education needs. While busing is a progressive approach that helps us achieve more diverse schools, it also places this effort on the backs of a few.

With this new schools project, we have the opportunity to eliminate busing entirely. We should act.

There has been much talk about the current conditions of Wildwood and Fort River, and most community members and elected representatives agree that both buildings have reached the end of their useful lives as schools. These buildings are not ADA compliant, do not promote student and staff health, and the open classroom design does not support teaching and learning.

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated by independent evaluators that simple renovation will be very costly (\$19 million per building), and will not address ADA compliance or design problems that impact learning. A full renovation of both Wildwood and Fort River would mean bringing both buildings down to the studs to repair current problems. The current estimate for full renovation is \$34.6 million for each building, and would create awkward classroom and shared use spaces. To build two new separate buildings would cost us \$38 million dollars each, or \$76 million. Neither of these two options include the cost of creating “swing space”, or temporary locations, to hold the students, teachers and their materials during renovation or separate construction projects.

Other figures you may hear are just not accurate. There are no simple fixes to the educational, health and safety issues that plague both Wildwood and Fort River. It seems to make the most financial, educational and common sense to replace both buildings with aid from the state now. The cost of building or renovating goes up at an average of 3.5 percent every year in construction costs.

Finally, although there are people in the community who believe that the district can more easily access and use MSBA money through their accelerated repair program, this is not accurate. The MSBA Accelerated Repair Program is designed to help school buildings with expensive one item fixes ([see attached MSBA policy, document C](#)); the MSBA will not allow schools to use this pool of money for buildings that require more extensive renovation as they believe this is not a good use of state funds. We used this program in the region to replace our Amherst Regional Middle School windows, and know that buildings such as Wildwood and Fort River are not eligible for these funds due to the extent of their need.

We must do all we can to protect our public schools and move them forward into the 21st century. Our goal should be to focus on giving every child access to the best public education possible and work toward closing an achievement gap that has plagued our local and national public schools for years. This project is an exciting and important step toward that goal.

Massachusetts School Building Authority

Deborah B. Goldberg
Chairman, State Treasurer

Maureen G. Valente
Chief Executive Officer

John K. McCarthy
Executive Director / Deputy CEO

December 2, 2016

Dr. Michael Morris, Interim Superintendent
Amherst Public Schools
170 Chestnut Street
Amherst, MA 01002

Re: Town of Amherst, Wildwood Elementary School

Dear Dr. Morris:

The Massachusetts School Building Authority (the "MSBA") is issuing this letter in response to the Town of Amherst's (the "District's") letter dated November 22, 2016 by which the District notified the MSBA that the vote to support the Wildwood Elementary School project (the "Proposed Project") did not pass at Town Meeting on November 14, 2016. In its letter, the District stated that at least three reasons contributed to the Proposed Project not passing at Town Meeting: a lack of support for the proposed elementary grade reconfiguration, concern over the proposed size of the new facility, and the introduction of a co-located model as the preferred option. The MSBA notes that these three factors were at the core of the decisions made by the District during the feasibility study/schematic design phase and formed the basis of the District's recommendation of the preferred solution.

The District included in its letter a request for an extension of the Feasibility Study to consider a different grade configuration, a "twin K-6 model" for 670 students, and another request for more time to secure Town Meeting support for the Proposed Project. Additionally, the District included a request for the MSBA to clarify its policies regarding changes to a project approved by the MSBA Board of Directors (the "Board"), and its upcoming Statement of Interest process.

On September 28, 2016, the MSBA's Board approved the District's Proposed Project which consolidated the existing Wildwood Elementary and Fort River Elementary Schools into a new "co-located" elementary school in one building serving grades 2-6 on the existing Wildwood Elementary School site. This preferred schematic was consistent with the District's Educational Plan dated December 2015 (updated March 16, 2016) and the Enrollment Certification dated June 6, 2016.

In response to the District's request for an extension to the Feasibility Study to consider a "twin K-6 model" for 670 students, I have attached the previous position from the District regarding the School Committee's decision on January 19, 2016 to support a district-wide 2-6 grade structure. The District's proposed change is contrary to this decision previously approved by the School Committee, and is contrary to the District's Preferred Schematic Report, dated February 2016, within which all K-6, 670 student options were considered to be "not viable" based on the School Committee's vote for grade reconfiguration. The District's recommendation for a preferred schematic was based on a design associated with a 2-6 grade structure, and this grade structure formed the basis of the educational program and the selection of both the preferred solution and the selected design. Pursuit of a "twin K-6 model" for 670 students would be different from the project proposed by the District and approved by the MSBA's Board. Therefore, the MSBA is unable to consider an extension to the Feasibility Study for the purpose of exploring options different from the approved Proposed Project.

If the District determines *that a different project* from the one proposed and approved by the MSBA Board is the preferred direction, the District will have to submit a new Statement of Interest and await a second invitation from the MSBA Board to enter the Eligibility Period phase of the MSBA's process. If the MSBA Board were to issue such a second invitation, the MSBA would require the District to:

- start the process anew including the selection processes for an owner's project manager and designer; and,
- perform a new feasibility study and schematic design independent of financial participation from the MSBA for duplicated work.

The MSBA's grant program is a non-entitlement, competitive program, with its grants distributed by the MSBA Board based on need and urgency, as expressed by the district and validated by the MSBA. The number of invitations that the Board is able to authorize each year varies and is contingent upon a number of factors, thus applying for an MSBA grant is competitive, and not every Statement of Interest can be invited into the grant program.

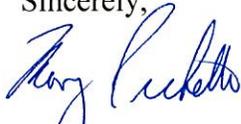
The MSBA anticipates the 2017 Statement of Interest filing process to open the first week in January 2017 and close the first week in April 2017. Districts are encouraged to file a Statement of Interest for school facilities not already active in the MSBA grant program. The MSBA is pleased to continue to work with the District as it takes the time for stakeholders' voices to be included and heard by the Town in its deliberations for next steps. Until the District's decision on how to move forward with its current Statement of Interest is submitted by the District, and reviewed by MSBA staff, the MSBA is unable to confirm the District's ability to file a Statement of Interest in 2017.

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Wildwood Elementary School Letter

If the District determines as a result of its community outreach *that the same project* as proposed by the MSBA and approved by its Board is the preferred direction, the District must demonstrate local support by obtaining voter approval of the project with the defined scope and budget on or before March 31, 2017.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 617-720-4466.

Sincerely,



Mary Pichetti
Director of Capital Planning

Cc: Legislative Delegation
Alisa Brewer, Chair, Amherst Select Board
Paul Bockelman, Amherst Town Manager
Katherine Appy, Chair, Amherst School Committee
Ron Bohonowicz, Director of Facilities and Maintenance, Amherst Public Schools
Thomas Murphy, Owner's Project Manager, NV5
James LaPosta, Designer, JCJ Architecture
File: 10.2 Letters (Region 1)

This is a major and difficult decision that lies before us. We have an opportunity to receive money that would allow us to, in some form, build a new school building. I think this is a great thing. Faced with this great opportunity, there's a lot of disagreement about how we should best proceed. But I think it's important to recognize that, if we look at the big picture, we are in a great place. We live in a beautiful town with an amazing and diverse community that cares passionately about our children and their education. We love our schools, which is in many ways why the decision that lies before us is so challenging. We have something that we love that so deeply affects the most important, precious people in our lives, and we don't want to lose it.

That said, I also believe that there is no option before us that would spell disaster. If any of these options were chosen, we could make it work and we could make it good. The strength of a school, whatever its size or configuration, is hugely impacted by the quality of the management and leadership. We have an amazing leadership team and staff that I believe will bring their strengths to whatever school is built to make it great for our kids.

In exploring the options before us, I have felt strongly from the beginning I must support an option includes Fort River. To leave one building in poor condition without a clear time frame or clear financial plan for rebuilding when we have an option to do otherwise is, in my mind, inequitable and irresponsible.

In considering a two-wing K-6 school or a two-wing 2-6 school with Crocker Farm as a pre-k-1 grade building, I have tried very hard to look deeply at the implications of these two options. I have talked to parents and read many, many letters and emails, attended forums, considered research, spoken with administrators and members of our staff who work with the more vulnerable members of our community, and gotten perspectives from educational leaders and educators in outside communities. I have found that there are weighty arguments, strong opinions, and research to support elements of both models.

Strengths of k-6:

- Community
- Continuity without disruption of transitions
- Relationships over an extended period of time
- Feeling known and valued (children and parents)
 - Pride and ownership in their school and their identity as members
 - Being able to look around and see people who know and care about you — former and future teachers, a known group of peers
 - Older children mentor younger children, younger children bring out the positive mentoring side of older children
 - Consistency, predictability as they proceed through grades
 - Siblings can be part of the same community
 - Some families can walk or bike to their school for their full elementary experience
 - This kind of long-term “family” supports children to grow and thrive into confident, competent young people

This is work that our elementary schools do so well, it is deeply valued in our community.

Strengths of reconfiguration:

- While a majority of our students are experiencing the benefits of our system, there are children in our community who are not able to access it as successfully.
 - All kids are going to the same place, access to the same resources
 - programmatic opportunities of having all resources in the same building (language? arts? after school programs, maker spaces, technology, etc.)
 - Kids don't have to be districted according to their socio-economic level
 - Children don't have to be sent to a different school because their school is full, as is happening and will continue to happen in the Crocker Farm district
 - Class sizes can be more balanced, giving all kids reasonable sized classes
 - Children with special education needs would have all the needed resources in the same building, allowing better opportunity for access, flexibility if a child's needs for services change as they get older, able to be in the same school as everybody else including siblings and neighbors
 - ELL kids can access the same resources, which can be more differentiated according to their needs
 - We see our community as the larger community — the whole town

Concept of equity in terms of access, participation, and benefit — while we are striving to do it in our k-6 schools, we can do it better with the reconfiguration option.

Academically,

- Better opportunity for teacher collaboration within a grade level which is beneficial to teaching and learning, harder to communicate from youngest grades to older with a building transition
- Again, programmatic opportunities when all resources are in the same place seems very exciting

Early childhood center

- Piece that I have been exploring more depth, talking to people with experience in similar configurations
- Great potential for creating an educational setting really designed for the developmental and academic needs of this age group, combined expertise of specialists, resources, playgrounds, especially designed for these needs
- Concern about a school with a large number of young children all in the same building (7-8 grades) — I've talked to people who work in similar settings, felt only positive about ability to manage kids and build community in this kind of setting
- Preschoolers coming at 3 years identified with special education needs no longer have to transition in the middle of their earliest educational journey- two more years in that setting could be a very positive boost to these students who are some of our most vulnerable
- Preschool can be expanded — something we really should look at in terms of how we could do this so it actually would allow access to preschool for those children who currently aren't able to attend and arriving in kindergarten without the kind of preparation of their peers, thus seeing an achievement gap already looming at the age of five.

So, on one hand I see the k-6 model, widely loved and supported by the families and teachers in our community.

On the other hand I see a new model, unfamiliar to us and garnering significantly less vocal support, that I believe would do a better job moving us towards allowing all students to access the best education that can.

So, the question I ask is: can we build those incredibly important strengths of the k-6 model into a reconfigured model? Can we build strong communities where children and families feel known and valued, where they feel pride and ownership and deep connections with the adults and children around them? Can we find ways for to foster positive mentoring relationships between older and younger children? Can we manage transitions well so that children are able to cross the bridge the a different school without it being negative and disruptive? Can long-term relationships be formed enough to do the important work of fostering positive development that our schools now do so well? Are there ways we can ameliorate the challenges of a family having multiple elementary children in different schools? Can we manage the transportation issues that arise of having children travel farther?

As I said before, I believe so much depends on management and leadership. Any of these options could be done well or poorly. I believe that our schools are so well loved because education and equity in this town are approached with such intention and passion. I hear people say they don't want decisions to be based on finances but really what's educationally best for the students. That's amazing. We value our children's education so much. That's a huge reason I moved to Amherst. I believe our education team has every ability to build into this reconfiguration the strengths of community that are so critical to our schools.

As a school committee, are we prepared to embrace an unpopular decision if we believe it is truly best for the students? If we do, we have our work cut out for us in terms of helping our community take on a major paradigm shift. This is the challenge before us.

Statement of Interest (“SOI”) for Accelerated Repair Program

Introduction

The Massachusetts School Building Authority’s (the “MSBA”) grant program is a non-entitlement, competitive program, and its grants are distributed by the MSBA Board of Directors, based on need and urgency, as expressed by the district and validated by the MSBA. The MSBA completes a review of available information regarding all districts that submit a Statement of Interest (“SOI”) for the Accelerated Repair Program (“ARP”) each year. The MSBA encourages all interested districts to submit an SOI to the MSBA, but the ARP is not appropriate for all potential projects. The ARP is for the partial or full replacement of roofs, windows/doors, and/or boilers.

The following information provides an overview of the SOI process from initial opening of the SOI period each January until the Board of Directors votes to authorize invitations at a subsequent late spring/summer Board meeting.

The SOI Filing Period

The MSBA opens its Statement of Interest system annually for districts to file one or more SOIs for either the Core Program or the ARP. The SOI is the process districts follow to identify the deficiencies and/or programmatic issues that exist in their facilities. Districts should submit one SOI per school for each school that they believe requires a project. An SOI should only be filed for a facility where a district has the ability to fund a project in the next two years. Over the last several years, the SOI system has opened in early January. SOIs are typically due for the ARP in early February and for the Core Program in early April.

Historically, the MSBA has invited approximately 40 to 50 SOIs for the ARP annually. The number of invitations that the Board is allowed to authorize each year varies. Among the factors the MSBA may consider should the MSBA be required to limit the number of invitations due to its annual statutory budget cap are the degree of the disrepair of the systems to be replaced and the frequency with which issues associated with that disrepair arise. As a project would not qualify for the ARP, a district should not file an SOI for the ARP if:

- the roof/boiler/windows/doors are less than twenty years old;
- the proposed project cost is projected as less than \$250,000;
- the school is judged by the District to be over-crowded;
- the primary use of the building is for non-educational purposes;
- the SOI itself seeks construction beyond roofs, windows/doors, or boilers;
- the SOI itself seeks boiler construction, excluding heating fuel storage and/or delivery, beyond the physical limits of the existing boiler room(s);
- or the District plans a future construction project for MSBA participation going beyond roofs, windows/doors, and boilers for the school.

If a project does qualify for the ARP, the scope of the project may not be fully reimbursable. Scope that may be required to complete the project but will not be eligible for reimbursement include:

- Building systems in spaces deemed ineligible per MSBA Regulations (swimming pools, hockey rinks, field houses and other such systems)
- Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”) upgrades necessitated when the estimated cost of the repair project exceeds 30% of the assessed value of the building
- Building systems beyond ARP scope (extended floor or ceiling replacements, fire protection systems and other such systems)
- Installation of canopies and vestibules
- Partial replacement of building systems with less than 20 years of service
- Replacement of underground storage tanks or gas lines up to the boiler room
- Replacement of rooftop heating, ventilation and air conditioning units
- Site work associated with sub-grade roof drainage
- Temporary repairs to building systems

The Funding Cap

The Commonwealth irrevocably dedicated a 1% statewide sales tax, known as the School Modernization Trust fund (‘SMART Fund’), to the MSBA’s capital program. The sales tax collection informs the amount of the annual funding cap to which the MSBA can obligate funds for projects. The enabling legislation limits increases or decreases annually thereafter by the lesser of four and one half percent (4.5%) of the limit for the prior fiscal year or the percentage increase or decrease of the dedicated sales tax revenue amount over the prior fiscal year.

The SOI Due Diligence Process

The SOI process involves the filing of an electronic and print version of an SOI with the MSBA by the dates established, with MSBA staff readily available to address concerns, questions and issues during the filing period. Once the filing period has closed, MSBA staff commence the due diligence process for all SOIs.

This 4-phase process includes:

1. Review SOI submissions for completeness;
2. Review SOI submissions and accompanying documents for content;
3. Conduct staff study visits, if required; and
4. Recommend SOIs for invitation into the ARP

During this process, the MSBA may seek to obtain additional or clarifying information from districts. As the MSBA reviews the entire cohort of SOIs received, it will determine the appropriate level of due diligence that will be required for each SOI and will notify districts of next steps accordingly.

1. Review SOI submission for completeness:

Once the SOI system has closed, MSBA staff review each submission to check that all of the required materials have been received. The MSBA works with districts throughout the filing period to ensure that the SOI is complete.

For all SOI submissions, the district needs to provide:

- A hard copy of the SOI with the required signatures; there are two separate certification locations in each SOI where district officials need to sign;
- A hard copy of the closed schools information with the required signatures;
- Hard copies of the required local vote documentation that is detailed in the SOI; and
- Any supporting materials required to be submitted with the SOI.

Districts are expected to submit the hard copies of the materials and have them post-marked on or before the due date for the ARP submission deadline. The district and the MSBA should discuss in advance of the filing date any extenuating circumstances or requests for exceptions to receipt of the hard copy material.

2. Review each SOI submission and accompanying documents for content:

Once an SOI is determined to be complete, MSBA staff review the information and any additional documents submitted by the district. MSBA staff then compile the data necessary to assess which SOIs filed in that calendar year may qualify for the ARP. Evaluating the qualifying factors relies on many different data sources. MSBA staff use the SOI, the MSBA project management system, the MSBA's 2010 Needs Survey, as well as information from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education ("DESE") website. There are many factors that can impact the assessment of an SOI, such as overcrowding, building condition, general environment and program deficiencies. As such, it is important to assemble as much data as possible so that staff may gain a thorough understanding of the issues identified in the SOI. An analysis of the qualifying factors produces a group of SOIs for further consideration. This further review may or may not require a staff study visit.

3. Conduct Staff Study Visits, if required:

If MSBA staff determine that a staff study visit is needed to complete the due diligence process, MSBA staff will visit the facility identified in the SOI. The staff study visit lasts approximately one hour and is an opportunity for the MSBA to further understand the issues identified in the district's SOI. MSBA staff request that the district have someone familiar with the facilities and systems present for the visit. The district is requested to provide a copy of the SOI floor plans (emergency/evacuation plans are sufficient) ahead of the MSBA's visit.

The staff study visit starts with a meeting to review the SOI and the MSBA process, and then to hear district concerns. The discussion is followed by a tour of the main areas of the school, as well as typical general classrooms and specialty spaces. If the district's SOI includes the replacement of the roof, then access to the roof should be provided to MSBA staff.

Dependent upon the number of staff study visits that are required, this phase can take approximately 4 to 6 weeks, with visits typically scheduled from March through April.

4. Recommend SOIs for Invitation into the Accelerated Repair Program:

Once the content review and staff study visits have been completed, MSBA staff once again review the factors, noted above, that can impact the assessment of the SOIs. As stated above, due to the statutory cap, the MSBA may be constrained to limit the number of ARP projects in a given year. Among the factors that MSBA may consider should it be required to limit the number of ARP projects, are the degree of the disrepair of the systems to be replaced and the frequency with which issues associated with the disrepair arise.

MSBA staff then provide their findings to the Chief Executive Officer, Executive Director/Deputy Chief Executive Officer, and the MSBA's Facilities Assessment Subcommittee. Once the recommendations have been accepted, MSBA staff present the recommended SOIs to the Board of Directors for a vote to receive an invitation into the ARP.