

Article 14 - New Middle School

Frequently Asked Questions

Over the past few weeks town and school officials have been asked a series of questions relating to Article 14 which requests that Town Meeting appropriate and authorize the borrowing and the funds necessary to construct a new middle school. Please find the frequently asked questions and responses:

What is the role of Town Meeting in this process?

Town Meeting is the legislative branch of Town government. In addition to adopting bylaws and appropriating budgets, Town Meeting has the responsibility of considering whether to authorize the Town to raise money through the sale of bonds, and to appropriate that funding for a specific purpose. Article 14 is seeking whether to authorize the Town to raise and appropriate funds to construct and furnish a combined Middle School at the site of the Bird Middle School. The action of Town Meeting, is part of a two-step process, combined with the debt exclusion ballot question, and is subject to and contingent upon an affirmative vote by the voters on November 2nd.

Johnson Middle School

How and why was the decision made to select a combined option at Bird Middle School? Why wasn't Johnson Middle School selected?

- Options that were considered by the School Building Committee (SBC) included:
 - New construction option at Bird closer toward Washington Street
 - A phased-construction option on the location of the existing Bird building
 - A combined option closer toward East Street
 - An option for a combined middle school at the Johnson location; and
 - An addition/renovation option for the current middle school.
- The SBC was tasked with narrowing the list down to two or three preferred solutions.
- They evaluated each option on certain evaluation criteria, including whether the option supported educational goals of the school department, the total cost, the total construction cost, the total duration of construction, impact to the existing school, impact to the existing fields, long-range town planning, and opportunity for future expansion.
- The SBC voted 15-0-0 on 1/5/21 to narrow the matrix down to three options: 1) Bird Middle School Addition/Renovation, 2) Johnson Middle School, and 3) Combined Middle School at the Bird Middle School site
- The SBC discussed the shortlisted options again at their meeting on 1/26/21. The discussion revolved around traffic, water/well issues, roads to/from construction sites, existing and potential future ball fields, environmental impact and costs.
- The SBC voted 11-4-0 on 1/26/21 in favor of selecting "B1" as the preferred option – the proposal that is being presented to Town Meeting and the voters.

What is going to happen to JMS?

Ultimately it will be up to the Select Board to decide what to do with Johnson Middle School. The Select Board discussed this matter at their meeting on 10/12/21 and decided they will review the options after the election. It is expected that the Town Administrator will form a task force if the debt exclusion passes that will provide the Select Board with some reuse recommendations for the building.

At this time nothing has been decided. However, ideas that have been suggested include:

- Converting some of the building to a recreation center. There is a demand for gym space and the expanded space at Johnson will allow the Recreation Department to use the classrooms for specialized classes, the kitchen for cooking classes, and more.
- Moving the Feeney Preschool to the JMS site. This would free up space at the Elm St. School and enable the preschool to accept additional enrollments (currently an existing waitlist).
- Possibly renting the space to The Education Collaborative.
- Leasing the building to an interested party.
- Assist the Food Pantry with some of their identified space needs.
- Take the building down and sell the land or keep it.

Financing

How is the Town financing this project?

The Town is financing this project through a debt exclusion. M.G.L Chapter 44, section 7 limits the maximum term to not exceed 30 years. Specifically, the laws states, *“Cities and towns may incur debt, by a two-thirds vote, within the limit of indebtedness prescribed in section 10, for the following purposes and payable within the periods hereinafter specified not to exceed 30 years.”*

Borrowing lengths of 20 / 25 / 30 years were evaluated by the Select Board in June 2021. After reviewing the following numbers, the FY 2022 estimated impact of borrowing \$75,000,000 (assuming level debt service payments with an estimated 3.5% interest rate) at the time was:

- \$551/year additional increase for 20 years
- \$473/year additional increase for 25 years
- \$423/year additional increase for 30 years

At their meeting on June 29, 2021, the Select Board voted (5-0-0) to go with a 30-year borrowing length.

Reasons for the 30-year borrowing length included:

- Borrowing for 30 years compared to 20 or 25 years allows the tax impact each year to be lower and thus more manageable for the taxpayer.
- The current middle schools in Walpole were built in the mid-1960s. It is expected that the new middle school building will have a long, useful life – 50+ years
- The tax burden associated with the new building will be spread out between current and future Walpole residents.
- Stretching out the debt service schedule provides relief to current taxpayers and enables future taxpayers who will enjoy the asset to share in the cost of the project while also benefiting from the low-rate environment.
- The Town’s financial advisors have suggested that municipalities model their options in the context of their existing and prospective debt in order to quantify the impact on debt service budget and tax impact. Currently, the Town has just over \$6M in excluded debt service to be paid off over the next 9 years by 2030. Each year, debt service will decline thus lessening the tax impact to the taxpayer.
- Both Medfield & Westwood have recently decided to borrow for 30-year terms for their school projects.

Are there any projects that are going to be paid off over the next few years that will fall off and lessen the impact of the debt exclusion?

Override projects coming off the books:

- High School Renovation -FY 25
- Elm St renovation – FY 26
- Boyden Renovation -FY 26
- Library – FY 30

These projects account for approximately \$115 per year on the average tax bill. If the debt exclusion passes the net impact by 2030 will be $\$439 - \$115 = \$324$ each year

How much of the project is being paid for by the residential and commercial base?

For FY 21 at the current shift of 1.275 the breakdown of \$77,764,533 is:

- Residential 83.64% or approximately \$65,042,255
- Commercial, Industrial, Personal Property 16.34% or approximately \$12,722,278

Building Committee

What role does the Permanent Building Committee play in the process?

In order to participate in the Massachusetts School Building Assistance program and be eligible to receive tens of millions of dollars, the state requires that Walpole form a School Building Committee. The SBC oversees the program from start to finish. This requirement from the state supersedes the Town's by-law requiring that the Permanent Building Committee oversee all building projects. Walpole decided to have a 15-member committee that allowed for a diverse group of Town representatives to ensure that the building was designed to meet the needs of the school, the Town and the community. Given this, the SBC was intentionally organized to include 3 members of the Permanent Building Committee (PBC). These members were elected by the PBC on April 24, 2019 to represent the PBC in the

process. The 3 members of the PBC participate actively in the work of the SBC and bring their technical acumen to the process and represent the PBC throughout the process.

The PBC continues to exist to directly support all other building projects. Currently there are no other building projects in-progress. When that changes, the PBC will be engaged as required by the Town Charter.

Misc. Building Items

Will the proposed building have renewable energy or any green elements?

- The Town is targeting LEED silver designation with the proposed building.
- Use of energy efficient systems that are 20% more efficient than the Massachusetts energy code.
- The project Team will partner with Eversource and Mass Save to explore rebates and incentives.
- The building will be constructed to Net Zero Energy Ready to meet State mandate targets.
- The building will be located in an optimal position to realize maximum solar orientation. The building will be solar energy/photovoltaic system ready for future renewable energy.
- The building will be constructed to include a highly insulated envelop; all electric HVAC systems, LED lighting and controls to maximize operating efficiency.

Items of note include:

- The Town recently was designated as a Green Community through the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.
- Walpole has worked with Sharon and Norwood to hire a regional Energy Manager that is split between the three communities.
- Thus far the Energy Manager has worked to ensure that the Green Communities Program grants were executed, worked to ensure that the Town is on track to purchase LED Street lights and pursued grants to offset the cost purchase the lights.

Are there any aspects of the proposed building that are not eligible for reimbursement through the MSBA?

Yes, there a few costs that are not eligible to be reimbursed through the state program including legal fees, asbestos abatement, the auditorium, and moving costs. The largest ineligible cost is the related to the auditorium.

Why is an auditorium being included in the project when the costs are not eligible?

- The MSBA mandates that the District develop the best possible educational plan for the district that is cost effective AND educationally appropriate - not the “least expensive” -The least expensive is not necessarily the best solution.
- Having an auditorium that seat 600 is educationally necessary and appropriate – the identified need for the auditorium came out of the visioning sessions, community forums and is in the 66-page Education Program.
- Currently, every student takes a music class (band, chorus, orchestra, or music). The music and drama programs are integral parts of both middle schools. Having an auditorium separate from the cafeteria will enable music classes, assemblies, and other courses/enrichment/interventions to be held at any time during the day.
- Multiple visioning and community sessions were conducted by school officials. One of the key outtakes from those sessions was a strong desire to build a school facility that allows for community access (evenings, weekends, and summer months).
- The auditorium is an important resource for the school and the larger Walpole community. It will be used by various community and school-based performing arts groups.
- It will be the largest and most technologically advanced auditorium in Walpole. (Walpole High School seats 500 and is 20 years old)
- Both the auditorium and the cafeteria are needed to support both in school and after-school programming. Both areas will allow for community outreach by providing school/community education and partnerships.
- The kitchen/cafeteria will be utilized to provide vocational opportunities for our special education programming. The space will support job training and hands-on learning for our special education students. This partnership is an integral part of our inclusion program.
- If there was no auditorium there would be a need to add square footage to create/design additional classrooms which would likely offset most of the costs saved by not including an auditorium.

What happens if the voters do not authorize debt exclusion?

- District will notify the MSBA of vote results.
- MSBA will likely close out the project.
- Needs of the district will remain.
- Construction costs will continue to rise.

Items of note include:

- The Maguire Report commissioned by the Town in 2013 identified the need for a new middle school. The projected cost for a new middle school in 2013 was estimated to be \$58,000,000.
- The Town of Lincoln recently self-funded a project that originally failed to pass as an override for a school project. The projected cost for Lincoln in 2012 was \$49,000,000 some of which would have been funded through the MSBA. In 2018 it cost the Town \$93,000,000 and the town received no assistance from the MSBA

What is the Cost Per Square foot of the building and how does that compare to other projects?

- As of September 1, 2021, the Walpole cost per square foot was estimated to be \$571 per square foot.
- The average cost per square foot per the MSBA website is \$630 per square foot.

Are there any traffic changes that are going to be made to the area as a result of the project?

- Yes, there will be changes to traffic entrances and exits to the site. The submitted plan does call for an accessway off of East Street.
- Initially an access road was proposed as a method to bring construction equipment onto the site and keep it separated from the everyday traffic of the school during the construction phase of the project. As design progressed, the construction access road developed into a separate access road that would allow for better traffic circulation and flow.
- The accessway off of East Street provides better options for residents and buses looking to access the site from North and West Walpole. Without the East Street access, traffic would need to be rerouted to Washington Street, and either come up High Plain Street and take a left, or up Plimpton Street and Short Street and take a right.
- After the SBC selected option, a traffic study was conducted and investigated whether a traffic light would be needed at the Washington Street entrance. When performing the study prior to adding the second egress off of East Street the stand-alone Washington Street access point performed negatively. When the traffic study was re-run for Washington Street including the East Street access road, no negative metrics were indicated. Adding the Access Road eliminated any triggers for a signal at Washington Street.
- Police Department and Fire Department requested an access road from East Street to allow for more than one egress to respond in a critical incident and to facilitate a quicker evacuation if necessary. There is a desire/need to place a second egress on site.
- Some neighbors on East St side have expressed concerns that added a new access road will have a detrimental impact on their property. The SBC discussed and deliberated the access road at the following meetings: March 30, 2021, April 13, 2021, May 18, 2021, July 1, 2021. The SBC has tried to be responsive to neighbors' concerns however at this time the access road is going to remain because it provides the most on site most flexibility to mitigate the traffic from all of the surrounding roads.
- The design team is committed to working with the with the neighbors to mitigate the perceived impacts as we progress through the process

Have there been multiple public outreach sessions for Walpole residents to address concerns or questions regarding the proposed building?

Yes, in addition to the bi-weekly SBC meetings that have been multiple Community Forums and Opportunities for Public Input and Discussion on the following dates:

1. September 23, 2020 – Middle School Community Forum (via Zoom)
2. January 20, 2021 – Middle School Community Forum (via Zoom)
3. April 7, 2021 – Middle School Community Forum (via Zoom)
4. June 3, 2021 – Middle School Community Forum (via Zoom)
5. September 13, 2021 – Finance Committee Discussion re: Article 14 (at Bird Middle School)
6. September 22, 2021 – Middle School Community Forum (in-person at the Council on Aging)
7. October 5, 2021 – Select Board Discussion re: Article 14 (at Johnson Middle School)