

Medfield Board of Selectmen with School Committee
Meeting Minutes, April 7, 2022

Place: Hybrid Meeting held at Medfield Public Safety Building, 1st Floor Training Room.

Call to Order

At 7:00 pm, School Committee Chair Jessica Reilly called the School Committee meeting to order.
At 7:00 pm, Selectmen Murby called the Board of Selectmen meeting to order.

Selectmen Present: Gustave Murby; Osler Peterson; Eileen Murphy.

School Committee Present: Jessica Reilly; Timothy Knight; Michelle Kirkby;
Anna Mae O'Shea Brooke; Leo Brehm. **Absent:** None. **Participating Remotely:** None.

Guests: Robert Herbstzuber, Bob Sliney, Ashley Stein, Gireesh Sahukar, Sean Collins, Bill Warner, Laurel Scotty, Steve Callahan.

Disclosure of video recording.

Public Hearing: Priorities and Progress, Moving Forward to a New Elementary School Project

School Committee Chair Reilly kicked off the meeting. Tonight will be a listening session. The Board of Selectmen and School Committee want to hear the community's future, focused thoughts about how to create a facility that meets the educational needs of our Town and achieves a level of consensus that reasonably ensures there could be passage at the Town Meeting and with a valid vote.

Ground Rules

We will accept comments from the room as well as on video. There is a Google.doc form posted to Town and School websites which will open at 9:00 pm. The form will be open for one week until April 14.

In the spirit of moving forward, we ask that you don't propose specific architectural plans or school building plans. Talk to us about process, your tolerances, about communication, how we make decisions as a Town, how Boards make decisions. How do we directly and accurately communicate Town projects, not just the School Committee, or Selectmen? How do we communicate directly with you and receive your feedback directly in a way that feels meaningful and allows you to feel heard? This is a fresh start.

Selectman Murby said the process we went through last fall polarized the Town. Before we have a School Building Committee, we want to hear what people have in mind, but also to set the tone for conversations. Let's rediscover the quality of conversations we can have in Medfield. As we move forward with a reconceived School project, what do you think is important from a broad perspective, and how should we listen to and engage the public?

Robert Herbstzuber, 7 Cross Street

- Data and surveys should have been respected in the last process leading up to the Town Meeting vote.
- The Town's message was "we have the support; this is moving forward" but the data did not match up.
- We didn't take the opportunity to look at the data and realize we did not have the support to move forward.
- Don't say, "they don't know", "they're not the experts".
- Experts would look at the data and see this was not the project the Town wants at this time.

Ms. Reilly: Where did you get most of your data?

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Mr. Herbstzuber said:

- He went to a handful of sessions; and reviewed FaceBook social media.
- Until there is an \$80 million price on the table, that is what drove people to come out to vote.
- Decisions were made without opportunity for citizen input.
- Instead, the message was "we need to meet this or that educational issue".
- Renovation was never on the table.
- Town should have asked "can the homeowners stomach an average \$850 tax increase to do this?"
- People will give feedback when there is a money question on the table.
- If people feel listened to, they'll say "I'm not going to win the argument, but I can support it."
- If we didn't do MSBA, could we get creative and combine grades, work with Parks & Recreation rather than follow the rules of MSBA? Why not consider renovation?
- The Town will get to 67% voter approval when there are no preconceived notions of what voters want.
- If citizens saw more options, that would bring people back to the fold and you'll get more consensus.

Ms. Reilly asked the communication question: How should the Town get information to citizens early in a project to say it is important that citizens get engaged now?

Can you conceive a centralized way of being able to have an MSBA or a School Building Committee or Town project? The School Committee can send out a blast announcement to families, but the Town does not have that option. This is a Town as well as a School project.

Mr. Herbstzuber said his kids are almost out of school so he is going to miss information very soon. He does not know how the Town should communicate non-emergency issues to citizens. The Town has everyone's phone numbers, but it is for emergency purposes with an opt in or opt out feature.

Mr. Murby rephrased the communication question: You said present the public with options, not here's how the project is going.

How do we pump out concise information to tell you how we're doing? How do we engage citizens with the Town at critical points in time while there are still options before complex decisions are made?

Mr. Herbstzuber said at the beginning of a proposed project, instead of saying we have 3 or 4 concrete projects from which the Town is going to choose. Make the choices more distinct for citizens to choose.

Mr. Knight said MSBA has milestones or gateways. We must hit certain thresholds and timelines to advance through the process.

- Pay attention to data points around process and decision points.
- Data points need to be sounded off to the community before you move on to the next one.
- Otherwise, it's hard to pivot if you get too far down the road.
- Research why so you can help people change their opinion before moving forward on projects.
- Get 500-600 people in a survey if you can.

Ms. Reilly said there also needs to be a system around data collection that is agreed upon by everyone.

Selectperson Murphy said, if early on the signal is X, and the Town is not responding to X, but responding to Y, but X is larger than Y, there is a problem.

- In these sessions, we should be asking what are young families who moved to Medfield looking for?
- What should the Town look like?
- If we're at 50/50, how do we get people to sway one way or the other?
- We must remain honest and transparent.

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- She hopes the School Building Committee By-Law group sends the right signal. We're starting off differently.

Bob Sliney, 6 Overfield Drive

Recommendations going forward:

- Put a dollar amount on the table early and you will engage citizens quickly.
- Tell citizens how the project will impact their tax bill.
- MSBA shouldn't be abstract without a figure; if you don't use hard numbers, you create doubt.
- Establish a \$ price point that will build this type of building.
- Going forward without a price point puts responsibility in the wrong hands.
- A price point gives direction to building experts and context to what is peripheral and necessary.
- A price point will set the standard for parents and taxpayers for what they can afford, how to decide.
 - o What is the impact on our taxes going forward?
 - o What can we expect with those funds?
 - Add classrooms to one school, build a recreation center, a new school?

Ms. Reilly asked the communication question: How do we reach the largest swath of the community so they feel engaged in this process?

Selectman Peterson asked, are you suggesting the Town should be giving out the number, or we ask the residents what the financial number should be? Various committees have a view of what the figure would be. It wouldn't be one number. We could give 5 or 6 options, standalone through Parks & Recreation, doing the community center. The previous concept was to give cost X amount for a school. People will give you feedback.

Mr. Murby asked how the education program fit into the cost of schools we are pursuing? Respect the professional side, the broad concepts of where the education system needs to go to stay abreast and current.

Mr. Sliney:

- Will \$600 additional tax build a school?
- \$600 additional tax for all citizens will build a \$52M new school. That puts things in context.
- Then people can determine whether it's worth a campus.
- The constraint is how much can you spend; how much is it worth to the taxpayers?
- Walk it down from \$63 million.
 - o What is the cost of the combinations, the creative things?

Ashley Stein, 304 South Street

She agreed with Rob Herbstzuber.

- Lots of people showed up to vote because of the large dollar amount.
- The concern is getting people's attention too far down the road toward a decision.
- Early on, ask people what tax increase you can tolerate?
- If most taxpayers can tolerate a particular increase, what options will fit into that dollar amount?
- Present people with different price ranges that people would stand behind.
- Then determine location, specifics, make it educationally sound.
- Put deliverables out that people can use to process their input.
- Make sure we're still investing in our schools and teachers have what they need so teachers will stay.
- MSBA complicates the process.
- What will it look like if we spend 8 months developing a school plan that MSBA will support while at the same time developing the Town's plan for funding it ourselves?

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- What if MSBA says we can have funding, but then because Townspeople were involved in the process of a school they want, now the Town does not want to be restricted by the MSBA?

Ms. Reilly asked the communication question: What will get people with small kids who can't get to meetings, who don't have time to review the videos; what is the channel that would get you to feel you know what's going on?

Ms. Stein said her peers and other parents are on FaceBook. They're not participating in FaceBook, but they're reading the conversations whether or not it is true.

Ms. Reilly said perhaps the School Building Committee could use a FaceBook as a vehicle.

Selectperson Murphy said not everyone is on FaceBook. Use paper communication in addition to the internet. Utilize various events where a wide range of ages gather (soccer games, the Library). Possibly use a neutral internet source that the Town and School Committee endorse. She doesn't want to use FaceBook to gather data.

Ms. Reilly asked if citizens would trust the data is from a trusted source when it is coming in from so many different sources. How do we get a consensus that this information is valid, that a number is trustworthy?

Ms. Stein suggested the data would be trusted if it resided on a neutral internet source.

Ms. Reilly asked whether everyone will trust the School Building Committee.

Gireesh Sahukar, 98 Pleasant Street

He had emailed six factors he would like considered:

1. Academic impact of a new school; fighting over a price tag is the wrong way to think about it
2. Schooling expansion - a lot of talk about bringing in pre-K to public education. Medfield will need to expand schooling set and consider another whole audience.
3. Schooling options - There is currently no year-round schooling option as in other communities
4. Proximity to all residents, equitable from all 4 corners of Town
5. Campus and transition - They like the concept of 3 elementary schools and transitioning from one school to the next. Understanding and have social behaviors are developed during transitions.
6. Minimizing taxes

He had suggestions on how to get citizens engaged. Meetings at 7pm on a weeknight is prohibitive. Consider outdoor, Saturday afternoon meetings. Try to look at different venues; take a broader and more inclusive view of these factors.

Sean Collins, 13 Hickory Drive

- Is the Town committed to the education of future generations in providing a new school system our children will need for the future? Going through this process, this is unclear to us.
- Why did this vote fail? Is it strictly the money? \$60 or \$80 million seems high.
- Is it ancillary (traffic, location, water, fuel)?
- Is there any thought about Wheelock or renovating the entire system of elementary schools altogether?
- What about the State Hospital site? Is there opportunity to use some of that for education needs? It seems a very open, available space. Could it be considered?

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How to get people involved:

- Sporting event, monthly community event at the high school?
- Bring people together again, outdoors, Saturday afternoon, especially for unvaccinated, younger kids.
- Parents have very limited time in the evening.
- FaceBook is very destructive.

Ms. Reilly responded:

- There is necessity to have multiple communication channels.
- How do we tailor our information so that each group gets the information?
- Parents with older kids might not be available on Saturday afternoon.
- Have different channels of communication.

Mr. Murby asked Mr. Collins:

- Should communication events be coordinated by neighborhoods or the Town?
- Does the Town provide a service to groups that want to come together on Saturday afternoon?

Mr. Collins suggested:

- Keep it simple. You will need multiple ways to communicate to different demographics.
- Start with once a month where people have a chance to attend.
- I don't know your timeline. Have something that is at least out of the internet connection.
- Get people to come together face to face.
- When people are together, they may say, I don't agree with that.
- Someone can say, would you come talk with the Town or School about it?
- Or, if they had an opportunity to come, but they don't want to do it, we can ask why are you complaining then?

Bill Warner, 10 Garden Drive

- It's important to engage with the most impacted residents (parents of future students)
- A top-of-the-line building project is irrelevant.
- Cost to the taxpayer is most relevant.
- \$850 increased tax per household was going to buy an \$85 million building with Wheelock with MSBA.
- With future inflation, it may only buy a \$40 million building.
- We're not doing this project this year but 3 years down the road.
- Town has a floating rate mortgage
- 1% on \$50 million turns a \$50 million project into a \$40 million project overnight
- The Town may be looking at a massive, deferred liability
- We have no ability to mitigate the risk on interest rates.
- We may be looking at a project in 3-4 years for a \$50 million building that may cost taxpayers \$1,400.
- If you show up with this price tag in the future, it will be hard to approve.
- A private company would go out and take an interest rate cap and straight hedge against the liability.
- I don't know if that's something we could do.

Mr. Murby asked what do you want us to keep in mind moving forward?

Mr. Warner would ask the Board of Selectmen to consider:

- How would you think about managing the interest rate risk?
- As we progress down the road, how would you communicate if we had agreed on a \$50 million building at \$800 per taxpayer, this is now \$1200 or \$1500 per taxpayer?
- It's all going to be predicated on the future interest rate when we enter into the loan.
- Costs could vary widely; based on variation of interest rates; it could affect purchasing power

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- You may say we can afford \$50 million today, but down the road it could be worth \$40 million
- Unless we have financial gearing around that risk, you're going to be subject to the whims of the market.
- The Board of Selectmen should take this up before proceeding with the project.

Ms. Reilly asked what timeline is most feasible to maximize low interest rates? She said the Town has people to look at this.

Ms. Reilly asked Mr. Warner a communication question:

He worries time is of the essence; there are still raw feelings around this. All the communication may not help if certain things work against us regarding costs. Transparency will go a long way in making people feel more comfortable about what the future holds if we can manage the risks of financing the project.

Laurel Scotty, 10 Green Street

- Pick a Sunday the Patriots are not playing; maybe people will come.
- Possibly Medfield TV is a good avenue
- Campus financing option - We may be the only school system with a principal for 2 grades in 3 schools
- A campus would eliminate the cost of a principal.
- Shared specialty teachers become a more economic and qualitative way to educate our children.
- If we have an \$82M school but we make it a campus, we need to educate the people who are doing this
- Save by having Parks & Recreation move into Dale Street School
- Part of Dale Street School could be used for pre-school with tuition income realizing savings.
- Moving things away, Parks & Recreation won't need a building, so we'll have mortgages paid off.

This must be explained in the mix as options. People need to know if we do it this way, it'll cost this.

Mr. Murby said she described a strategy that places the project in several transactions, not a single project.

Ms. Scotty said one will feed off the other. If the campus goes up, then 2, 3, 4, 5. Parks & Recreation move into the Dale Street School. We could have had 4 pre-school classrooms. That's significant tuition coming in. That could offset the School budget. It doesn't have to be one way. Think creatively.

Steve Callahan, Warrant Committee

He agreed with what Ms. Scotty and Mr. Warner said about strategic planning and communicating the dollar cost impacting taxpayers.

He has had five more aspirations after spending 3 months reflecting on how things went last summer.

1. He hopes we will avoid delay and inaction. With interest rates and inflation on the rise, our taxes are high. Pursue a prudent path; do the right things, but insist on action.
2. He hopes we will trust. Trust is important in an open form of government. I think we've lost it. It's hard to earn and easily lost. We should respect people on committees and experts that will put in the challenging work. We should understand and listen to each other. Let's not ignore key facts.
3. I hope we stay focused on the possible and engage together. Assume good intentions. Look forward, not backwards. Avoid the tendency to use labels. Let's not describe past efforts or proposals as winners or losers, or people as advocates or opponents. Let's invest our time and energy to offer changes to either previous proposals or new proposals.

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4. I hope we accept established facts that are relevant. Express opinions or views, but except that there are established facts that may be more relevant than what you're bringing up.
5. Avoid the temptation to offer alternative information or half-truths to persuade others to your point of view. It only serves to complicate things. Appreciate there are limitations to social media. It cannot fully inform or give detail to such a complicated project. Consider there are other forms to get information than social media. There is no magic bullet for a better way to communicate. For any new project, we should invest the dollars to have help in that area.

I hope we will listen to each other and move toward consensus. There will be trade-offs. Be willing to consider and reconsider previous assumptions. Listen, deliberate, argue, but consider that some decisions and recommendations will be out of your control. But consider they will be made by people with more expertise than yourself.

Megan Sullivan, 36 Wichita Road

She said Mr. Callahan had really good context to forwarding the process.

Building on what Ms. Scotty said about developing a master plan concept, Mr. Sliney said we need to land on a price early on. I think consensus on the location early in the project would allow it to move forward in a different way. There were too many variables that people were throwing out last time around.

School Committee Chair, Ms. Reilly thanked everyone who contributed tonight.

Board of Selectmen Chair, Mr. Murby firmly believes the entire Town is at least 95% more unified that we need a new school.

Ms. Reilly listed next steps:

- School Committee discussion next week about this
- She assumes Board of Selectmen and School Committee will come together again
- Next step also needs to be the School Committee By-Law and looking toward annual Town Meeting

MOTION: Ms. O'Shea Brooke motioned to adjourn the School Committee meeting at 9:07 pm.
Seconded by Mr. Brehm.

Vote: Ms. Reilly, aye; Mr. Knight, aye; Ms. O'Shea Brooke, aye; Mr. Brehm, aye;
Ms. Kirkby. All in favor. None opposed.

MOTION: Mr. Murby motioned to adjourn the Board of Selectmen meeting at 9:07 pm.
Seconded by Mr. Peterson.

Vote: Mr. Murby, aye; Mr. Peterson, aye; Ms. Murphy, aye. All in favor. None opposed.

Respectfully submitted,

Dale Michaud
Recording Clerk

Minutes Approved by School Committee: May 19, 2022