

SCHOOL BUILDING TASK FORCE

A joint committee of the Selectmen and the Stow representatives to the Nashoba Regional School District convened a new building committee following the dissolution of the previous School Building Committee in January 2006.

The objective of the new “School Building Task Force” was “to collaborate and develop a consensus on two or more building and/or renovation options for grades Prek-5 and present them, with cost estimates, at the May 2007 Annual Town Meeting, or sooner if possible”.

Twenty residents applied to membership and ultimately the joint board appointed 11 voting members as well as a non-voting facilitator (listed at the end of this report). Excerpts from the charge, as revised and approved on March 7, 2006 read as follows:

Duties and Scope:

1. Agree on the needs.
2. Prioritize those needs and determine their costs.
3. Understand and use the information and data already compiled by the School Building Committee; i.e., don't “reinvent the wheel”.
4. Provide sufficient space for the ten-year projected enrollment
5. Provide space for the preK-5 students that is acceptable by today's educational standards.
6. Minimize cost and tax impact.
7. Maximize state reimbursement.
8. Prepare two to three proposals reflecting various costs and the associated priority needs that are included.

Considerations:

1. Retain at least part of the grade school operation in or near the center of town.
2. Keep Center as a school.
3. Include future space needs for grades 6-8.
4. Examine other grade schools in the area to help benchmark land and building space requirements.

The task force met for the first time on March 20, 2006. From that time forward, the committee met weekly in an effort to resolve the long standing challenge of meeting the needs of our elementary school space. Below is a summary of the progress on key duties through the end of December.

Needs: We spent many meetings educating ourselves on the education program needs of our schools as well as on the structural needs/limitations/strengths of the current buildings. This developed into two sets of criteria which we called “Pre-screen” and “Evaluative” or in other words needs and wants. Over time we refined these and agreed on a extensive list which we planned to use to evaluate any future solutions developed with our architects. We asked the community in October at an open forum for their ideas on what should be included in these lists and then presented our evolved list at a second community forum in January 2007.

Enrollment: The state agency, Mass School Building Authority (MSBA), requires that 10 year enrollment projections be addressed as part of any new proposed building project. This had been a topic of much discussion over the last years, so we requested updated figures which were received in the fall of 2006. Because of the recent downturn in the housing market statewide, NESDEC was no longer using an “accelerated growth model” which would acknowledge that

Stow is actually still in a high rate of development mode (for example, acknowledging the 40B developments already permitted and under construction). Committee members studied and reviewed both old and new enrollment projections and, acknowledging that demographics is not a pure science, felt we had to project something higher than the new 623 figure. Because the architect needed to have a firm figure with which to work, the committee agreed in December to use an enrollment number of 660 with core facilities built around the need of 700 students. This was due to the fact that core space (cafeteria, gymnasium, library, etc) is harder to expand later and is often the weak point in renovating schools.

Space for educational standards: Incorporating projected enrollment is only one portion of the space needs of our buildings. Educational programs and legal requirements have changed dramatically since our schools were built, leaving us with insufficient space even if enrollment did not change. Working with the Superintendent and Symmes Maini McKee Architects (SMMA), we have identified which areas are particularly lacking in program areas. These square footage requirements will be incorporated into our criteria and evaluated against existing and potential changes in room sizes and quantities.

Location: There was a feeling among many that last year's Town Meeting message included a preference for at least part of the elementary schools to remain near the center of town. Because of the lack of town-owned land elsewhere, the Committee has operated under the assumption that we'll exhaust the possibilities of using existing school property before we consider a new location.

Future space needs at Grades 6-8: When we received the updated enrollment figures, it was clear that Hale is on the brink of having a space shortage. This had been a discussion within our committee, as it was with the previous SBC. In late December, we asked SMMA to add a site analysis of Hale Middle School to their scope: the goal was to identify what flexibility incorporating Hale into our solution might give us as well as what possible options Hale has in terms of addressing its own enrollment growth.

Viewing other schools for benchmarks: The committee has viewed a half dozen schools around eastern Massachusetts to both understand the breadth of solutions available to us and to specifically review sustainable design options which are part of the MSBA program.

As this Town Report is distributed, the citizens of Stow will know what our final proposals are for solving the elementary school building challenges. Our committee by its make up represents the breadth of concerns and ideals of our community and so we are confident that our proposals will be in line with the majority of the residents' personal goals.

As Chairman, I want to thank each of my committee members for putting in a huge effort to moving this challenge forward to a successful conclusion. It's hard enough to have this charge after a difficult town meeting discussion that created many hard feelings, but a committee of eleven (plus 3-4 regular attendees) is not easy to keep focused! Each member has been extremely committed to our requirements of keeping an open mind, learning from each other, asking excellent questions and thinking creatively. I thank you all.

Respectfully submitted,

Ellen Sturgis, Chairman
Gary Bernklow
William Byron

Lynn Colletti
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Norm Farris

Sara Kilkenny
George Nisotel
Steven Quinn
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Rob Kaufman, Facilitator
Rick Lent, Associate Facilitator
Ernie Dodd, Planning Board Liaison
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