

A TIMELINE FOR STOW'S NEW SCHOOL BUILDING PROJECT

The School Building Committee (SBC) has been examining a number of pertinent and crucial issues regarding the future of Stow's elementary schools. At the same time we are frequently asked questions such as:

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- Who among our grade school students will attend a new or renovated school(s)?
- What will happen to the Center and Pompo schools?
- Where will we locate any new construction?
- And, of course, how much will the entire project cost?

Interest in the SBC's work is one of the principal reasons that we have engaged in such extensive outreach efforts to the community through joint board meetings, public forums, informal canvassing of our neighbors, and publishing a series of articles in our local newspapers since last Town Meeting. The SBC is also constructing a page on our Town's new website further informing the community of our work, its progress, and its direction. (<http://stowma.virtualltownhall.net/Pages/index>) We encourage interested Stow residents to view the SBC's page regularly during the coming months as our work enters a critical phase: completion of our evaluation of feasible construction, renovation, and/or addition building options and selection of the one that best meets the needs of Stow's Pre-Kindergarten through Grade Five students over the next ten years and beyond.

Perhaps the question that our fellow residents most often ask regarding the new elementary school construction project is "when will it be finished?" -- assuming, of course, that the SBC's proposal is supported by the voters at Town Meeting. While we do not yet know for certain the exact form the needed capital improvements to our grade schools should take, predicting a completion date for any particular plan is very difficult at this point. Our best case scenario places the completion date roughly around early 2011, but our difficulty in forecasting a certain date stems from the uncertainties surrounding the newly resurrected Massachusetts school building assistance program. Nevertheless, in this fourth update article we will endeavor to lay out a plausible timeline that answers this question to the best of the Committee's current knowledge.

As many of you will remember, the Commonwealth formerly defrayed a portion of the expenses its cities and towns incurred in building, renovating, and financing their school facilities out of the General Fund at rates which varied across the state. That school building assistance program required municipalities to pre-submit their proposals, and then, as long as the construction plans conformed to certain regulations standard in the public school design and construction trades, the state would agree to reimburse over time a percentage of the costs associated with the project. For instance, this program is currently helping pay about 65% of Stow's expenses to build and renovate the Hale Middle School.

Over the life of the program, however, the state began releasing school building aid more and more belatedly as municipalities submitted more and more school

construction projects. In the late 90's, this highly popular educational aid program became too expensive for the state budget to continue to sustain and was eventually suspended. Since the program went into a moratorium, communities across Massachusetts – like Stow – have postponed making needed capital improvements to their school facilities in the hope that state assistance would be reinstated at some point.

These hopes were apparently well-founded because the state school building assistance program will return, but with a strictly limited funding mechanism. This program will now be managed by a new Massachusetts School Building Authority (MMSBA) as a department of the State Treasurer's Office. The new MMSBA is slated to begin accepting applications on July 1, 2007. Between now and then, the MMSBA will propose regulations that revise the design and construction parameters the plans in these applications are required to follow and lower the reimbursement rates for each Massachusetts city and town. The MSBA's authorizing statute requires it to finish promulgating these regulations no later than July of 2006. In addition, the MMSBA is currently assessing the entire state's school facilities needs by cataloging all those building projects that municipalities have thus far put on hold, and its staff to complete this needs assessment some time this summer.

The results of this state-wide assessment will have major significance for the timing of Stow's elementary school building plans because of the program's new funding scheme. The MSBA will no longer reimburse school building projects over time as a line-item appropriation in each year's state budget. In the future, MSBA approved projects will be funded when the construction commences, but the state funds now set aside for these purposes will be restricted to no more 20% of the Commonwealth's annual sales tax revenues. In other words, the MSBA has only finite funding for school building projects that it can authorize each year.

The upshot of all this restructuring is that the MSBA will evaluate school building proposals for conformance with its newly revised application requirements. However, starting in 1997 the MSBA will also rank these applications by needs-based criteria that have yet to be defined. Any municipality whose school building project is not approved because of these funding limitations and/or ranking will be permitted to resubmit its application in successive fiscal years, presumably until the MSBA finally issues its approval or state funds are no longer needed to proceed with the project.

The SBC is following the developments in the new school building assistance program closely because we plan to apply before beginning any renovation or construction project. We have been informed that the MSBA's revised design and construction requirements for school building plans will not differ greatly from those followed by the previous authority managing this program, and we are taking this putative policy into account when evaluating the educational specifications and conceptual plans for the various options currently under consideration. Based upon information furnished by the State Treasury, we estimate that the MSBA will agree to fund around 50% of Stow's expenditures on a grade school building project, and our financial analysis is based upon this projected funding rate.

Operating under these assumptions, the SBC is preparing to take all steps necessary to submit a conforming and compelling application to the MSBA when it starts accepting proposals in July 2007. The first step is to complete our review of the various construction and renovation alternatives currently under consideration within the next six months. The SBC will then present its recommended plan at a Special Town Meeting this Fall. If the plan we recommend involves acquiring land for construction of all or part of a Prek-5 grade school, the SBC also expects to have identified a parcel and negotiated a purchase price before this Special Town Meeting. Accordingly, we anticipate placing an article on the warrant at the Fall 2005 Town Meeting authorizing the purchase of any land necessary to implement the SBC's recommended school building plan.

After any necessary property is acquired, the SBC expects to return to Town Meeting in the Spring of 2006 to petition the voters to commission our consulting architect to draft detailed design plans for the grade school building(s) project and estimate a precise, line-item budget for this work. In the Spring of 2007, the SBC will present the architect's detailed plans and scale models to Town Meeting. At that point, the SBC will ask the voters to authorize construction of the project contingent upon receiving MSBA funding in the first round of approvals. Following this timeline, Stow will be in a position to submit the final plans in a formal application for elementary school building assistance to the MSBA promptly in July 2007.

According to its Interim Director, initially the MSBA will probably institute a three month rolling application period. We estimate that reviewing and vetting the numerous state aid applications from the Commonwealth's municipalities will presumably take the SBC another six months or so. Therefore it is unlikely that Stow will learn whether or not the MSBA has granted its application for financial assistance in the first round of approvals before March of 2008.

After that date, however, forecasting the next part of the project timeline becomes highly speculative. We currently have no way of knowing whether or not Stow's application to the MSBA will be among those approved for funding in 2008, or whether it will be one of those slated for resubmission to the MSBA in subsequent fiscal years. We must remember that many other school districts in this Commonwealth have vital school building projects that they feel are just as pressing as ours in Stow. However, the new MSBA has announced that it will also consider retroactively funding needed school construction projects which are started before it has issued an approval. Therefore, if Stow's elementary school building project is not approved in the first round of approvals, the SBC will return to the Town to ask the voters to approve construction of its recommended plan on either a partial or total basis and then submit its application to the MSBA for retroactive funding. The problems will persist with or without state funding.

After Stow decides to proceed on either basis, projecting the timeline for this work becomes fairly straightforward. Updating the architectural plans and sending these documents out to bid pursuant to state law will take approximately three months. Once a contractor is selected and construction work begins it will take up to two and one-half

years to complete the project. Assuming that the construction on all parts of the job is completed roughly at the same time, Stow should be able to move students into upgraded facilities within three years of getting the “green light.”

In conclusion, the best case scenario is that work on Stow’s new or renovated grade school structures will be complete sometime between the Fall of 2010 and the Spring of 2011, or around six years from now. On the other hand, it is possible that construction on this building project may continue start later because of potential delays in obtaining MSBA approval for the project. While the members of the SBC want to assure residents that we will do everything possible to expedite the process for obtaining an early and favorable decision from the MSBA, we are also prepared to ask voters if they will fund this project without state assistance.

The SBC is happy to answer any questions regarding our activities and plans. We usually meet at 7 p.m. on the first and third Monday each month at Town Building. You may also contact Steve Dungan, Chairman at 978-897-5803 or s.dungan@att.net.