

School Committee Facilities Update, Spring 2006

The Needham School Committee quantified the need to address a growing middle school population in the 1998-9 Kastle Boos Comprehensive Facility Master Plan. At that time, the proposed plan envisioned a second middle school being built by 2007. In the intervening years, significant facility deficiencies at the High School and the unexpected, though welcome, availability of \$25 million in state SBA funding for the high school required a change in those plans.

As a result of that change, a new High School building is scheduled to open in September, 2006, with the balance of that project to be completed by September, 2008. Understanding the financial impact to citizens of the High School project, the School Committee and School Administration have, since its approval, worked closely with the Future School Needs Committee to identify as precisely as possible the critical dates for facilities to address the Middle School population growth.

In 2005, the School Committee was asked to include its needs in the Town-wide Facilities Working Group study. The Facilities Working Group was authorized at the May 2005 Annual Town Meeting and is scheduled to deliver an interim report to the May, 2006 Town Meeting and a final report in November, 2006. Given the limited number of sites for town facilities, the town-wide needs and the high potential costs of new facilities, this was a reasonable approach, although the timing was challenging given the problems facing the middle school population.

Further complicating the selection and timing of a solution were two additional considerations:

- Elementary School population growth has accelerated since 2003, overwhelming the additional capacity gained by new construction and compromising educational programs (see “Elementary School Population Growth”, below)
- The state’s School Building Assistance program, which has historically absorbed 45-50% of the costs of school construction in Needham, is projected to re-open for new projects only in July, 2007 (see “School Building Assistance”, below)

In November, 2005, Superintendent Steve Theall presented the School Committee with the conclusions of his analysis that in the fall of 2008, the Pollard School would be physically challenged to house and educate our middle school students due to the need for an additional half student cluster. The School Committee endorsed his recommendation that the High Rock School serve as a Pollard Annex beginning in September 2008 for one cluster of children, then two clusters of children in 2009, and three clusters of children in subsequent years as an interim solution until a permanent solution is in place.

The following pages include a projected timeline for implementation of the interim and permanent solutions, along with additional details on enrollment and the MSBA program. Since 1990, the compounded growth for Needham’s school population has averaged 2% a year. At 2006 levels, that equals the addition of **four to five classrooms annually**. Put another way, since 2003 **we have added the student equivalent of another Eliot School**.

The School Committee thanks the Town of Needham for their ongoing support of our growing school population and welcomes your questions and suggestions.

Tasks and Timeline for the Interim and Permanent Solutions

Interim solution:

- November, 2006 - the School Committee will request High Rock Interim Design Funds at the November 2006 Town Meeting. We anticipate necessary design funds to be in the neighborhood of \$750,000.
- December, 2006 – February, 2007 - Physical design for High Rock renovation, including improvements in heating plant, disabilities access, and appropriate technology
- February, 2007 – Discussions with the Selectmen and Finance Committee on financing, anticipated vote by Selectmen to put a debt exclusion override on the ballot to fund construction
- April, 2007 – Debt Exclusion Override
- May/June, 2007 – RFP and selection of contractor
- July, 2007 – August, 2008 – Renovation and construction of High Rock
- September, 2008 – High Rock opens to receive middle school students

The timetable for the permanent solution is more tentative, reflecting the many decisions that must be made on a town-wide basis as well as the externalities (e.g., MSBA.) The **best-case scenario** is below:

- March, 2006 – School Committee reviews an initial set of possible building configurations as developed by the Facilities Working Group
- April/May, 2006 – School Committee narrows facility configurations to two or three viable options and prioritizes them
- End May, 2006 – School Committee holds public hearings for input into facility options
- June, 2006 – School Committee selects recommended option(s) for permanent solution
- July, 2006 – School Committee works with Selectmen on Letter of Intent to MSBA program
- Through November, 2006 – School Committee works with Facilities Working Group and Town boards to position Middle School construction within overall building and financial plans.
- November, 2006 – Expected consensus on timing and phasing of all construction projects proposed by the Facilities Working Group to be presented at Town Meeting. Initial projects will be identified.
- July 2007 – MSBA is scheduled to reopen for school building project applications. A successful submission, followed by successful override request of Town taxpayers, would result in the opening of a new school by approximately Fall 2011 at the earliest.

Middle School Population Growth

- In October, 1999, the middle school population for the 2009-2010 school year was projected to be **1,025** students.
- The Pollard Middle School currently houses **1,090** students in a building designed for 780 and expanded to 980 with 10 portable classrooms three years ago as a stop gap solution.
- In October, 2005, the Middle School population for the 2009-2010 school year was projected to be **1,203** students.
- Current projects call for the population growth to continue through at least the 2012 school year, when the middle school population will reach **1,369** students.
- Thereafter, the Town expects to maintain a middle school population of **at least 200 children more** than those attending the overcrowded Pollard today.

Elementary School Population Growth

- Current elementary school enrollment is **2,390** in elementary schools that have an enrollment capacity of 2,160 at current program levels. Elementary enrollment is projected to rise to a peak of 2,600 students in grades K-5 in 2009, and then level off **around 2,500 students** for the foreseeable future.
- Since 2002, Needham has seen a pronounced shift in the number of students opting to attend Needham Public Schools rather than private schools. Currently, nearly **95%** of our Kindergarten age children are attending Needham Public Schools. A few short years ago, 15% of that age population would have attended private schools instead.
- Our elementary schools have already added additional sections at each grade level and face further additions.
- The need for additional classrooms has forced several to move art and/or music onto a cart again.
- The KASE program will be offered at the High Rock school next year because there is no room in K-5 Elementary facilities.
- The new MSBA program's application requirements include demonstrating, for elementary education facilities, that "adequate provisions have been made in accordance with local policy in support of all-day kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, and extended day programs".

The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA)

The MSBA was created by legislation in 2004. The MSBA inherited all the projects of the previous School Building Assistance program. Since that time, the Authority has focused on:

- organizing and understanding the construction and funding of the backlog it inherited
- floating the State's largest bond offering
- doing a school building survey of all buildings in the State
- starting to get payments out to cities and towns. Needham has been the recipient of some faster payments already.
- drafting guidelines for a new School Building Assistance program

During this period, the MSBA has not accepted any new applications for school construction funding. It is anticipated that the MSBA will be issuing new rules for applying for reimbursement sometime this year. It is expected that the MSBA will re-open for applications in July 2007. Anytime between now and filing an application, towns must complete a Statement of Interest expressing their building needs. This Statement of Interest must be jointly signed, in Needham's case, by the School Committee and the Board of Selectmen indicating Town support for the building need.

Please Attend the School Committee Facilities Public Hearing on May 16

The School Committee will hold its first public hearing on facilities options. While all options will be available, the School Committee has indicated and will present the options that we believe are best suited for consideration. Public comments are welcome. The hearing will be at the Broadmeadow School on May 16 at 7:30pm. Please check the School Committee website for public information to be discussed at the hearing.