

Dedham Public Schools
School Committee – Joint Meeting w/ Select Board & SBRC
HYBRID MEETING (O’Brien Room, Town Hall, 450
Washington St., and via Zoom)
December 12, 2023

MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE and DPS Administration PRESENT:

Victor Hebert
Mayanne Briggs
Chris Polito
Stephen Acosta
Dr. Flynn Gallant
Supt. Nan Murphy

MEMBERS OF THE SBRC PRESENT:

John Tocci
Steve Bilafer
Jonathan Levi (architect)

MEMBERS OF THE SELECT BOARD PRESENT:

Dennis Teehan
Dimitria Sullivan (remote)
Erin Boles Welsh

Dennis Teehan, Vice-Chair of the Select Board called the joint meeting to order. He announced that Dimitria Sullivan will be attending remotely. Jim MacDonald has a conflict of interest so he will not participate.

Victor Hebert, Chair of the School Committee called the joint meeting to order.

John Tocci, Chair of the SBRC, called the joint meeting to order.

Pledge of Allegiance

Joint meeting w/ the School Committee, SBRC and Superintendent to discuss possible options for the process necessary to fund the Elementary School Project

PUBLIC COMMENT

(20 Minutes - Per the Select Board’s Public Comment Period Policy, Public Comment will be limited to the subject matter on the agenda)

Kevin Schohl, has children in the Dedham Schools. He supports the combined school project. He acknowledged that the School Committee and SBRC have gone through the process and put the work in. He feels that the committees and boards have listened to the community and he supports the combined school project. He asked people to put faith and trust in our public officials and board members.

Selina Sarmiento, Greensboro Rd. has two children affected by the school project. She views the new building project as a gift to our children in the Greenlodge neighborhood. She said we don't feel like we are losing a neighborhood school, but gaining a healthier and better school environment. She hopes that the Greenlodge students don't get left behind.

Andrew Pepoli, Greenlodge St., thinks the process was flawed because it was deceptively advertised. Greenlodge was not considered part of the project from the beginning. A non-voting member from Greenlodge was added to SBRC late in the process. He feels the enrollment number projections were always too low. The current enrollment projections do not take into consideration the MBTA Community Advisory housing law and the influx of international migrants. He said If we bend to the size restrictions of the MSBA then we suffer. He believes Greenlodge and Oakdale schools need renovation, but we need elected members to take a stand and push back on the MSBA methodology.

Scott Stief, Altoona Rd. moved to the Manor this May. He is a physics teacher and father of a 2-year old. As a Greenlodge district parent, he is pleased that his child will go to a new school. As a teacher himself, he feels that a modern facility will allow teachers to decompress and he believes that both students and teachers will flourish in a more modern facility.

Peter Zahka, 216 Greenlodge St., has lived in Dedham for 60+ years. He feels the common ground is that all people support replacing our aging schools. The SBRC recommendation has been driven by the MSBA process and economics, but it fails to take into consideration the importance of neighborhoods. He opposes the SBRC recommendation because it shutteres the Greenlodge School. According to the Dedham Master Plan, each Dedham neighborhood is unique. He feels we need to follow that philosophy. An informal polling predicts that the project will fail at garnering 2/3 vote at Town Meeting. We need to move forward with a stand-alone Oakdale School.

Vivian Daly, from Riverdale has lived here 25 years. She was one of the last students to attend the old DMS. She is expecting her first child in March. She is in favor of the merged Greenlodge/Oakdale School. She feels it is the quickest and least expensive way to get the largest number of students into new schools. She would like to see Greenlodge used for a preschool facility.

[Josh Donati, Select Board member, asked that one more person be allowed to speak in opposition to the project.]

Carlene Campbell Hegarty lives in the Manor and has two children at the Greenlodge School. She would like to see a stand-alone Oakdale School built based on accurate projections of enrollment. This project goes against the Dedham Master Plan that states the importance of smaller classrooms and walkability. She feels that 26 students are too many per classroom. Right now we can't find Paraprofessionals to help with classrooms. Redistricting will affect every family in Dedham, not just Greenlodge and Oakdale. Recommendations are meaningless until the School Committee casts their vote on redistricting. Until then, no parent should vote on the combined school.

Dennis Teehan said there will be more commentary after Board and Committee members speak.

Discussion & Presentation w/ Town Counsel and Town Clerk Re: Processes

Paul Munchbach, Town Clerk, and Lauren Goldberg, Town Counsel came to the podium. Mr. Munchbach said they were asked to provide an overview for the process for debt exclusion. He said the presentation

is informational only. The Select Board has the sole authority to place a debt exclusion on the ballot. The Warrant article for the debt exclusion needs to be submitted by February 16, 2024.

- 1) Assumptions and History – Mr. Munchbach gave a history of the 14 debt exclusions in Dedham over the past 30 years.
- 2) Definitions and comparisons – Ms. Goldberg explained that debt exclusion is a temporary tax levy for the life of the loan. Town Meeting appropriates the money and election is held to authorize the funds to be raised outside the Prop 2 ½ limits.
- 3) Potential sequences for a debt exclusion vote – Mr. Munchbach provided an overview of the different sequences.

Mr. Teehan said comments will be held until the next presentation.

Presentation by SBRC and Superintendent on current status of Elementary School Project & Discussion w/ Select Board

John Tocci thanked everyone who has been following the process. He said 761 students are attending substandard elementary schools in Dedham. MSBA gave us three options in 2020 when the process started. Revised enrollment numbers were submitted based on updated NESDEC numbers from November 2023. He recounted that over 70 meetings on the building project have been held in the past 2 years. The SBRC put in long hours of work and, this summer, determined that the best option is to build a combined school. Jonathan Levi Architects has been working on this design. If we use MSBA money will get 550-600 of the 761 students into a new facility at a cost of \$85M. If we tried to build new schools without MSBA funding it would be \$82M to build a 15 classroom school and \$112M for a 20-class room school. We are building two schools instead of one for almost the same price.

He announced that the Town is scheduled to submit a schematic design by December 28, 2023 that includes a final budget. Last night at the SBRC meeting the decision was made to use geothermal energy for efficiency.

Jonathan Levi said this project reflects today's education that is inclusive and collaborative, project based, community oriented and team building. Every element in the design is special to its purpose. He presented a 3D tour of the building. He also showed an overview map of the school and space surrounding the school. The facility will be split into two wings, one for grades 1-2 for 200 students and one for grades 3-5 for 300 for students. Each wing has its own character and is geared to age level needs. Gymatorium has its own community entrance and bleachers can be pulled out for events. Second floor has music and art rooms divided by cohorts. 3rd floor is reserved for the 5th graders. Taller part of the building is away from the neighborhood. Building will be all brick.

Supt. Murphy showed the inside of the new combined school and commented that the building will have plenty of room to absorb enrollment growth in the next ten years. The classrooms are designed for applied learning. Geared towards specialized academic learning. ADA compliance will provide accessibility to 100% of students. Educators in Dedham are already doing amazing things for students, but educators will now have expanded collaboration. There will be a cafeteria to provide hot lunches and breakfasts. The building will be climate controlled with heightened security.

Principal Hermesch of Oakdale and Principal McGowan of Greenlodge, came to the podium to display images of the current below-par facilities at Oakdale and Greenlodge and how conditions affect the experiences of educators and students.

Supt. Murphy talked about the redistricting plan that she will submit in early February. These figures will include all Greenlodge students attending the new school. She is working with a consultant and has told them that all Oakdale current students will remain in the same school until 5th grade. The redistricting process is happening early because of community demands. The previous redistricting changed based on the changes to the site and these updates will be included for School Committee approval in February.

Stephen Acosta from the School Committee Facilities Subcommittee talked about Greenlodge repurposing. He announced that Greenlodge will stay under the purview of the School Committee. They are committed to reuse based on Town need.

Erin Boles Welsh, Select Board member asked about the revised enrollment numbers. Mr. Tocci said that in November, NESDEC who projects enrollments for the state, matched 2020 numbers with 2023 numbers. This exercise identified variations of 30-50 elementary students across the district. The updated informal numbers were 300 for Oakdale, 515 for Riverdale/Oakdale and 615 for Greenlodge/Oakdale combination. Mr. Tocci said they haven't had time to discuss these implications. Ms. Boles Welsh asked if it will have an impact on the cost of the project for the combined Greenlodge/Oakdale facility. Mr. Tocci reported that the enrollment projection until 2031 showed no greater than 593 students would be attending the Greenlodge/Oakdale facility in any given year. And each classroom would still maintain less than 30 students per class. Additional reimbursement said that

Mr. Levi reported that the state funding for furniture, fixtures and technology would increase by about \$150K to reflect the increased enrollment. There is a process that we will have to go through for this additional reimbursement.

John Tocci said that waiting for new enrollment numbers would require them to pull out of the project and it would delay the project by about a year. SBRC projects that a one year delay would cost \$6 or \$7M and this amount pales against the \$150K extra reimbursement. If we want something different from the combined school then we have to plan a new development and design and the project will need to be re-voted by all boards. That would cause a delay of more than a year.

Erin Boles Welsh asked Supt. Murphy about whether all students of all ages who are now in the Oakdale/Greenlodge districts would be kept in the same school. Supt. Murphy said that is still to be determined, but she would like that to be a priority.

Supt. Murphy confirmed that higher need learners are a priority and they are looking at how disparities can be redistributed through redistricting. If the Town does not allow the new combined school, then they would have to redistrict some of the higher need Oakdale students because the building doesn't have the capacity to accommodate them. Regarding repurposing the Greenlodge to a preschool facility, Supt. Murphy said we would need a feasibility study to determine how the building could accommodate pre-school needs. Ms. Boles Welsh asked if it would be a fee-for-service school? Mayanne Briggs, School Committee member said it would be a fee-for-service school with up to 15 additional classrooms. Similar to the DELTA program at the High School.

Dimitria Sullivan asked how the Greenlodge School is going to be able to accommodate pre-school if it has been said that it's not appropriate as an elementary school? Ms. Briggs said that the rooms on the first floor are suitable and the unsuitable rooms would not be used. Some classrooms would not be able to be repurposed.

Ms. Sullivan asked about the possibility of still building a stand-alone Oakdale school. Mr. Tocci said certain aspects of the stand-alone school may not be totally reimbursable. Ms. Sullivan asked about operational savings of combining the two schools. Ms. Briggs said they don't have those figures right now, but that there will be efficiencies because teachers won't have to travel. Ms. Sullivan said it would be interesting to have that information. Ms. Boles Welsh asked whether the educational model could be reconfigured. Ms. Briggs said they determined about a year ago that school grade configurations could not be changed. Ms. Bole Welsh asked about the community space. Jon Levi explained more about how the building could be used for assembly space. She also asked what capital projects have been undertaken since 2010 outside of the debt exclusion. Paul Munchbach said other capital projects: Town Hall, Senior Center, ECEC, Public Safety building, and Town Green were voted with a Town Meeting vote within the levy and without the need for a debt exclusion.

Josh Donati asked Mr. Munchbach about the timing of the different sequences for Town Meeting and the ballot question and they discussed the various possibilities for the debt exclusion vote. Mr. Donati also asked about the traffic analysis that was recently completed. Mr. Tocci replied that the conclusion of the study was that the seven intersections around the new school could handle the additional traffic. Mr. Donati asked the Supt. if there would be potential additional costs with the combined school? She said she understands that there will be no additional costs barring no increases to transportation costs.

Mr. Teehan confirmed with the Superintendent that not all the houses currently in Oakdale district will continue to be districted to Oakdale.

Mr. Teehan thinks the Greenlodge School piece is important to the overall decision of the project because it affects the anticipated costs. Mr. Acosta said the Facilities Subcommittee plan is to have the costs available before Town Meeting election and before Town ballots are cast. Mr. Acosta said we can refurbish the 30% of the Greenlodge facility without triggering ADA compliance costs. Mr. Acosta said Greenlodge was built in 1955 and a pre-school would be a short term plan with a minor capital cost. If it ends up being repurposed as a pre-school, he hopes it would be a 10 to 20 year proposal and then another long term solution could be established. Mr. Teehan said since we need a 30-year financial benefit, we have to take the Greenlodge costs into consideration if it's only a 10-year plan.

Ms. Sullivan said she considers this a listening session and she needs to digest a lot of information. She said she will defer any comments.

Mr. Teehan thanked the School Committee and he realizes most choices will raise conflict. He feels that decisions to date have been made with a clear rationale. However, he thinks that when you look closer at the reality of the project, the pieces don't all fit. Therefore he said it is a difficult decision for him.

Mr. Teehan iterated the problems that he sees with the combined school project:

- Financial benefits are not that meaningful. No benefits for next 12 years. There are long term benefits. He thinks the Town would be more ready for single standing schools.

- Greenlodge is an important aspect of the costs of the full plan and we need to know what we are doing with the Greenlodge School.
- He still thinks Oakdale is the best site, but even that has significant limitations.
- It's going to affect the fabric of our community. People worked their whole lives to be in these neighborhoods.
- He doesn't see a redistricting plan that could really work.
- Neighbors in Greenlodge who spent money paid high interest for 30 years and he doesn't feel right about that.

He suggests we take a step back and show benefits in a scaled back way that meets the concern of the neighborhoods, and he feels we need a clear redistricting plan and we need to commit to a schedule.

He feels that compromise is important here and he feels there is a middle ground that can be identified that everyone can feel more passionate and positive about.

Josh Donati, Select Board member, said that Vertex did an analysis of costs for a stand-alone Oakdale School and it's \$112M. Stand-alone school will cost significantly more for taxpayers both short and long term.

Mr. Donati talked about accusations that the committees knew that the consolidation of the two schools would happen at the beginning of the process, but he countered that there would be no motivation for this. He said if the Greenlodge community is not included, a lot of new families will not be getting a new school. We decided the Town Hall, Fire Station and Police Station were too old and needed rebuilding and now we are saying we might not be able to renovate schools built in 1902, 1920 and 1955. He feels that we can't say we spent enough and let's take a break. He feels that it is a weak argument to say we can't afford the project because if we wait, it will only get more expensive. He says we have talked about this project for so long that we now need to act on it. It's unacceptable to have kids in these buildings. If people are willing to spend the money to build three separate new schools, then we have to do that, but he believes that the MSBA subsidies offer us the best option. He respects the work of the School Committee and the SBRC to make these decisions.

Steve Bilafer, SBRC member, asked what Mr. Teehan meant by committing to a schedule. Dr. Teehan said he is looking for the School Committee and SBRC to make a recommendation to the Select Board.

Ms. Boles Welsh said that she knows the difficulty of this process because of the long lasting impacts, but no matter what, the students in Dedham will continue to get a solid education. The issues of neighborhood is at the forefront of people's minds. There are flaws in every scenario so we are not choosing from a right or wrong decision. It will be more expensive to commit to stand-alone schools. A stand-alone school would be \$82M and a combined school, subsidized by the MSBA would be \$85M. Stand-alone schools don't help with establishing equity across schools for higher needs learners. She said she grew up in Greenlodge and that school has been the center of that neighborhood. She is inclined to prefer a combined school but that is predicated on what happens to Oakdale. We need more conversation about how we want to create learning environments for our students. She wants to see a proposal that balances the flaws and opportunities in a more quantifiable way. We need to push for answers to the lingering questions around the project.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Additional Limited Public Comment (15 Minutes - Per the Select Board's Public Comment Period Policy. Public Comment will be limited to the subject matter on the agenda).

Dr. Teehan said the remaining people who are logged in will get to speak.

Matt Reedy, Lincoln St. is an abutter. He has no concerns about the redistricting issues because they pale against the improvements gained. There is no perfect plan but Dedham can't afford three stand-alone schools. The combined school project as it stands, maximizes benefit and minimizes costs. Greenlodge children will be missing out on a new school. He feels the lack of investment in Dedham education has gone on long enough.

Brian Keane, 182 Grant Ave. said in 2016 he voted against the new ECEC because he knew it would be too small. His kindergartner is at the ECEC but his classroom is in the preschool wing because it's already too small to accommodate all the children. He feels that Dedham needs to stop chasing the state money and making mistakes.

Danielle DeLuca, 37 Turner St., has three children under 7 years old. She said we are talking about future generations and she is in favor of the combined school. She feels a combined school would not affect the neighborhood feel. Some of us are closer to Oakdale but we are districted to Greenlodge. She feels that Riverdale is more of a neighborhood school. She said Greenlodge may get the highest test scores, but it's the least inclusive and diverse school.

Andrew Czasatsky, 118 Sprague St. appreciates the efforts of all committee and board members. This project could alter the neighborhoods. Does it matter if we start the project in 2028? The Manor will falter without a school. He is not sure they will refurbish the Greenlodge in a timely manner. Investing to maintain our neighborhoods is important.

Elliot Folds, 41 Tophill Ave is against the proposed consolidation. The project place costs above value. He said everyone says it's cheaper to build new than refurbish old. He knows that a lot of hard work went into the proposal. But the final decision should not be left to small groups and he hopes it will be considered with a wider referendum.

Dr. Teehan concluded that we all want to do right by our children. There is no perfect plan. He commended the SBRC for the work they have put into the project.

Motion was made to adjourn and approved by attending members of the Select Board, School Committee and SBRC.

Submitted by

Virginia Quinn

Recording Secretary