

DRAFT



SCHOOL COMMITTEE

BUSINESS MEETING OPEN SESSION MINUTES

November 15, 2022

Meeting:	School Committee
Date:	November 15, 2022
Location:	Remote
Attendees:	Pamela Beaudoin, Superintendent Avi Urbas, Director of Finance Theresa Whitman, Chairperson Jake Foster Matt Harrington Kate Koch-Sundquist Anna Lin Mitchell Erica Spencer
Absent:	Chris Reed
Guests:	Habeeb and Associates
Recorded by:	Maria Schmidt
Link to Reports and Presentations	https://www.mersd.org/domain/818

A. Call to Order – Ms. Whitman called the School Committee Business meeting to order at 6:15 pm.

- 1) **Public Comment** – Kristen McLaughlin, 22 Walker Road, expressed concern after receiving an email from another parent regarding the recent School Council election at Memorial Elementary. The Memorial PTO conducts School Council elections via Survey Monkey. The concern is that the survey was an open link that could be used by anyone without restriction to parents of current elementary students. Ms. McLaughlin characterized Survey Monkey as a faulty vehicle for the election.
- 2) **Student Report** – no report this week

[Type here]

- 3) Chairman's Report** – Ms. Whitman stated that she responded to email communication from community members.

School Committee Operating Protocol, read by Ms. Spencer: Demonstrate professional and collegial relations with each other - Maintain trust and mutual respect between and among Committee members, the Superintendent, and the administration by treating everyone with dignity and respect, even in times of disagreement.

4) Consent Agenda –

- Acceptance of Warrants: AP Vouchers: V1020 and V1021.

Mr. Urbas has added a new report in the file that summarizes expenditures by budget category for the General Fund (fund #101 on ledger), which can be used to compare spending on vouchers to categories listed on the most recent budget to actual/forecast report. In addition, this information has been added to the invoice detail worksheet, noting expenditure classification relative to SC approved budget categories.

- Minutes for approval: October 18, 2022 and November 1, 2022

Ms. Spencer moved to approve the Consent Agenda; Mr. Foster seconded the motion.

Discussion: Mr. Urbas responded to questions regarding the warrants. Regarding payment to Green Street Power, they act as a power company for rooftop solar. As a tax-exempt entity, we cannot monetize tax credits and need to work with a carrier who can by selling energy to us. This represents about twenty percent of the energy generation at the high school. We do not have to worry about price variation for this part of our energy either. In addition, Green Street Power paid the initial installation costs for the solar panels. Regarding late fees paid for Medicare/Medicaid, the district currently requires employees to enroll in the Medicare program when eligible, saving the district considerably. However, when employees enroll they have to pay a late fee based on their qualifying birthdate versus the enrollment period for the current year. The district covers this fee. Regarding School of Choice expenditures on the vouchers, typically we do not charge to this fund. However, this may occur if a school of choice student has out of district expenses.

Ms. Mitchell thanked Mr. Urbas for his work in providing further voucher details. She would also like to include a cash balance on these forms and stated that she would vote no today on voucher approval because are not included.

The vote via roll call: Yes: Mr. Harrington, Ms. Spencer, Ms. Whitman, Ms. Koch-Sundquist, Mr. Foster; No: Ms. Mitchell. The motion carried.

5) Sub-Committee Reports

- **Elementary Facilities/MSBC Sub-Committee** (Theresa Whitman/Matt Harrington) – Report will be by Habeeb and Associates

- **Finance Sub-Committee** (Anna Linn Mitchell/Theresa Whitman) – Ms. Whitman reported that the finance sub-committee has been engaged in learning about budgeting aspects of the special education department.
- **Policy/Communication Sub-Committee** (Erica Spencer/Jake Foster) – Mr. Foster presented the School Committee with a first-read of the sub-committee’s Finance policy update recommendations. These updates reflect recent state legislative changes and do not change operations. Mr. Foster asked that questions or comments be forwarded to the policy/communication sub-committee. Ms. Whitman held further discussion for the next SC meeting after members have had a chance to review the recommendations.

Motion to accept the recommendations of the policy sub-committee as a first read was made by Mr. Foster and seconded by Ms. Koch-Sundquist.

Vote by roll call. The motion carried unanimously.

- **Negotiation Team Sub-Committee** (Kate Koch-Sundquist/Chris Reed) – Ms. Koch-Sundquist reported that negotiations are on going and the sub-committee would meet the following day.

6) Superintendent’s Report – Superintendent Beaudoin began by calling attention to the MERHS field hockey team, preparing to take the field in the state semi-final match. She noted that all our athletic teams are to be congratulated on advancing to the post season. The previous week was a busy one across the district with Veteran’s Day observations and a short week for students due to conferences and the holiday. High School Staff had a professional development day featuring Jeff Perrotti’s DESE program on Safe and Supportive Schools. Mr. Perrotti was invited by students to speak to staff about gender issues so that they can better relate to our students and foster a safer, more-supportive environment in which students can access learning. Superintendent Beaudoin also shared that Memorial Elementary was awarded LEED Gold Status. LEED is a framework for healthy, efficient, carbon and cost-saving building and is a globally recognized symbol of sustainability. Coming up at the high school: quarterly report cards and National Honor Society induction.

7) Continued Business – Presentation of the Essex Elementary/Middle High School Facilities Report: Habeeb & Associates. Superintendent Beaudoin introduced the Tom Macleod and Steve Habeeb from Habeeb & Associates. Their company worked with us through the Memorial Elementary project and recently completed a facilities needs assessment on both Essex Elementary and the middle/high school. Their report is a big picture assessment to guide the school committee in pursuing a budget scenario. In particular, the timeline of the Essex Elementary project will impact the budget framing done with the towns. The School Committee has been trying to determine if we should apply to the MSBA right now, as the Memorial School project is completing, to get in

the pipeline or put it off one, two, or three more years. Mr. MacLeod and Mr. Habeeb provided some history on Essex Elementary. The main structures were built in 1957, with the gymnasium addition completed in 1975. The assessment highlighted a few large and most problematic areas. The school has one boiler, from 1975, that is operating with a burner from the old Memorial school boiler. Essex Elementary is dependent on this boiler for heat and hot water. In addition, the roof, from 1998, is nearing the end of its functional life. A standard life expectancy is between 20-25 years. As a single level roof, it is particularly worn. Extensive patching and sealing has been done to extend its life, and in several locations bubbling indicates that moisture is entering beneath the roof material. Most of the siding on the building exterior is failing. Base rotting and windowsill deterioration is evident. Windows in the newer addition are slightly better, but the original windows in the old section are aluminum, single-pane, and few have weather stripping. These spaces are very poor at temperature regulation and give credence to the anecdotal tales of students wearing coats inside during winter. After assessing the state of the building, repair targets with direct affect on academics were presented in two sections, Scope 1 and Scope 2. Scope 1 includes replacement of the Boiler, roof, windows, and HVAC system. Scope 2 includes addressing playfield drainage, masonry repair, exterior doors, kitchen equipment, interior painting, new floor, and mechanical updates. The total building summary for Essex Elementary breaks work into three scopes. Scope 1 should be done within one to two years; Scope 2 within three to five years, and Scope 3 items are grandfathered in or for completion in six to ten years. However, some items that are grandfathered may be required once a certain amount of updates have been completed, for example ADA requirements. Habeeb & Associates also completed a space needs assessment looking at the needs required for occupancy of 250 students. The existing building has more square footage than would be prescribed by the MSBA formula. However, these are spaces that have not been updated to current needs and programing. For example, the kindergarten classrooms are of adequate size but lack dedicated restrooms accessible from within the classroom. Two recommended options were presented. Option A: Complete renovation of the existing 55,000 sf building at a predicted cost of \$26 million or \$473/sf. Option B: Construction of a new elementary school of approximately 45,000 sf at a preliminary estimate of \$32 million or \$710/sf. These costs are taken from the MSBA website of recently begun projects at today's dollars. Mr. Macleod and Mr. Habeeb then presented the MERSD Middle/High School facilities conditions assessment. The campus is now thirteen years old. Major systems have an expected life of 20-25 years, and several systems are expected to come due in the next 10-15 years. However, in their assessment the facilities at MERHS have been well maintained and are in expected or better condition. Nevertheless, the district will need to plan for updates to the roofing system and HVAC. The building summary included Scope 1, 2, and 3 breakouts. Of note, Scope 1 includes replacement of the water filtration system and, Scope 2 interior costs include replacement of interior carpeting, some of which is beginning to show wear, particularly in the auditorium. Recommended steps for MERSD from Habeeb and Associates: For Essex Elementary School – major renovation or new construction and apply to the MSBA; for MERSD Middle/High School – plan for future expenditures.

Discussion: Superintendent Beaudoin reminded us, as the floor was opened to discussion, that we are not setting out to decide between a renovation or repair of Essex Elementary at this time. That decision will be guided by the MSBA process. This report is to guide the timeline to get there. Mr. Urbas stated that we have two buildings with two different needs and strategies for moving forward. While he is very pleased to see how well the facilities team has maintained the middle/high school building, it is clear that we will need a strategy to rebuild the reserve funds to meet its future needs. The report helps us to form an idea about what we can do on our own versus repairs that will require different funding strategies.

Questions: Ms. Whitman opened the floor to questions from the School Building Committee. Ms. Annie Cameron asked Habeeb & Associates for their opinion on which way the MSBA would direct the Essex Elementary project. Mr. Macleod stated that he believes the MSBA would require an in-depth feasibility study to evaluate 1) Keeping the existing building and renovating, 2) doing an addition, or 3) an entirely new building. The district submits an application stating that we require aid and why, and hopefully the MSBA agree and assist in determining the best course forward. Ms. Cameron asked if there are MSBA programs accessible for the high school's needs. Mr. Macleod stated that he is unaware of any. The MSBA has recently discontinued its rapid repair program and concentrating on their core, large-scale projects. Mr. Urbas stated that the district has been participating in state grant programs that assisted with upgrades at Essex Elementary, but he did not think that the middle/high school would qualify for those programs. Ms. Cameron stated that the estimates of cost per square foot seemed low. Mr. Gordon Brewster, of both the middle/high school and Memorial school building committees, weighed in to lend his support to the conclusions of the report and asked if there is a way to improve the architectural features within the existing Essex building, if the renovation path was pursued, to give it the look/feel of newer construction. Mr. Foster, who also serves on the SBC, asked for clarification about the assumptions underlying the categories of scope for Essex Elementary. Do they assume that we are keeping the building as is for the entire time frame, or are there some things we would not need to do if engaged in the MSBA process. Mr. Habeeb responded that there are, but it would depend on how much luck we have had predicting future failures. For example, if we were in the MSBA pipeline, we might be able to put off some of the roof work if we thought it could last until a new building opened. However, if that roof develops major leaks that then impact other systems, it would need to be replaced sooner. Mr. Foster asked how long the process to get to either renovation or new construction is likely to be and how that would inform what needs to be done to keep the school going or whether students would need to be in temporary facilities. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the list and categorization by scope is not a prescription for a piecemeal approach. Mr. Macleod and Mr. Habeeb agreed and stated that the report points out how much needs to be done. The economical way to do it is a major renovation, not a piecemeal approach. Mr. Foster noted that the items in Scope 1 would need to be done no matter what because of the time needed to get into the MSBA process. Mr. Habeeb stated that the district would need to monitor to determine just how long each area could last. Their report did not factor in bandaid approaches. It is possible that there could be other measures employed that could buy additional time, for

example the use of weather stripping, but they could not say how much time such approaches would buy us. Mr. Macleod added that to keep the building going they would recommend completing Scope 1 items fairly soon. Mr. Urbas provided context from the last building project, stating that once we knew we were in the pipeline, we tried to delay any capital projects as long as possible. You run a risk but certainly work to pause what is possible to pause. Superintendent Beaudoin remarked that the price per square foot estimates provided in the report may vary from actual figures. We would also go through a process of designing to program and including design features that are important to the community. When this was completed with the Memorial building project, it resulted in a larger cost in the end. For example, if the community wanted a full size gym to be part of the new construction. Superintendent Beaudoin also stated that the MSBA does its own analysis of enrollment, etc., and that may impact the size of the building they would approve. Mr. Habeeb stated that their cost estimates were taken from MSBA projects close to being bid. They did not try to project forward to costs at the time when our project would go to bid. Ms. Lisa O'Donnell, representing Essex on the SBC, asked the presenters to speak to how a major renovation would compare to new construction for contemporary teaching versus the 1950's teaching practices for which it was originally designed. Mr. Habeeb said that they would anticipate that a major renovation would include interior updates and would function well, but would not match a new building. Designing breakout spaces, etc. would be a challenge. A renovation does require that you give up some options. However, Mr. Habeeb pointed out that one of the biggest selling points of renovation is the square footage because we would get more. He stated that the feasibility phase is when these types of questions are fleshed out and answered.

Ms. Whitman opened questions up to the School Committee. Mr. Foster asked Habeeb & Associates, given their experience with the MSBA's current lineup, whether they would likely have many applicants ahead of us. Mr. Habeeb replied that for the MSBA the amount of space, or lack of space for teaching students, is a key element for consideration. From that perspective, Essex has adequate space and may be pushed down the list. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that Memorial benefited from a serious lack of space at the time of application. They were using unconventional areas, like unused locker room areas, to meet instructional space needs. For that reason, she recommends acting early because it may take a while to be accepted. Ms. Whitman asked about the life expectancy or a renovation compared with the 50 year life of a new-construction building. Mr. Habeeb stated that, because everything is re-done, the life expectancy is also 50 years. Ms. Spencer asked about the likelihood that the building will meet local needs 50 years out given that we do not know what kind of population growth may hit our communities, including 40B projects. Although this line of conjecture is not their forte, Mr. Habeeb shared that those projections would include delving into buildable land in town to see how much could be devoted to housing. There could be projects that bring many students to town. A rise in population might require an expansion. As a point of clarification, Ms. Whitman stated that Essex is currently at 2.6% affordable housing. Ms. Spencer asked about the accuracy of population projections used in the process. Superintendent Beaudoin said that in her experience the projections are very strong based on the information they use. However, they cannot predict significant fluctuations in real estate. She stated that

previously the district chose to build in more space to account for increased enrollment of students flowing back into the school. Mr. Urbas recalled that the MSBA requires us to have a contingency plan that can flex to accommodate enrollment fluctuations. Ms. Whitman asked if anything was on the capital project list for Scope 1 projects. Mr. Urbas said that the Essex boiler is on their radar. During the Memorial project, they were able to minimize the design requirements for the needed boiler.

Ms. Whitman opened the floor to questions from Select Board attendees. Ms. Ruth Peerson spoke to express her support for new construction at Memorial. Mr. Foster asked for insight into the scope of deliverables. Given that Scope 1 items assume the old building will be in operation for the long term, he asked about projections of likely costs in the shorter term, for instance the next three years. Mr. Urbas stated that he hopes to present that to school committee. He has discussed this with Mr. Waldron, facilities manager, and they should be able to present something along these lines to the School Committee for the budget season. Mr. Habeeb stated that they are prepared to offer their opinions regarding these items. Ms. Jodie Harris asked how long a full renovation would be likely to take, where students would go, and at what cost. Mr. Habeeb responded that they could not answer those questions as the time frame would depend on how the work was approached. Either students are elsewhere or there could be a phased building approach with temporary modular classrooms. Typically, a renovation would take longer than building new. Mr. Macleod confirmed that a phased process takes six to twelve months longer. Superintendent Beaudoin stated that the costs associated with displacing students would be examined during the feasibility phase. She clarified that we are currently at the point of submitting a statement of interest to the MSBA . We state our interest and identify all our areas of concern . Our application is assessed versus the standards and other applicants. If they think we are a candidate, they pull us in and we start to work on feasibility. We work with them on a pathway forward. The pathway may lead to renovation or a replacement, but will come with financial estimates, inclusive of phases in all potential timelines with financial escalators. That is when we get to the cost-estimate analysis of the two options. The next step from the current report is to decide when to initiate the Statement of Interest. Ms. Harris shared that the original discussion around regionalization emphasized keeping an elementary school in each town and having new buildings constructed. She expressed that it would be important to many community members to have new construction, even at the expense of the larger footprint for the old building. Ms. Koch-Sundquist asked for clarification that our first task is to determine a timeline, not to weigh the merits of renovation versus new construction, which Superintendent Beaudoin confirmed. Mr. Habeeb stated that if it takes too long to gain entry to the MSBA timeline, we may want to consider self-funding. Mr. Foster stated that early submission to the MSBA would enable us to see how our application compares to other towns and gauge how long we may be in the pipeline.

8) School Committee Comment – Ms. Mitchell asked for clarification regarding public comment and the process for addressing issues raised in this way. Given that today’s caller expressed concern for the School Council election process, Ms. Mitchell was

interested in the points raised. Ms. Whitman detailed the relevant sections of SC policy. Public comment should be limited to three minutes and should refer to something on the agenda for the current meeting. Public comment is not designed to be a dialogue. Separately, there is a complaint policy for the district. Complaints should first be addressed at the building level, either with the teacher concerned or the principal. Secondly, unresolved issues may be escalated to the superintendent. Finally, issues that are still not addressed to satisfaction can be brought to the attention of the School Committee by getting on the agenda via email request. The SC may refer the issue back to the building level if there has not yet been an attempt to address the issue there. The SC has a limited follow up for issues broached solely through public comment. Superintendent Beaudoin provided insight into the current situation with the School Council election. The original email complaint was generated by a server that did not list a sender. It was overlooked as junk mail. Since then, Superintendent Beaudoin has reached out to the current caller to see if the individual with the complaint is interested in coming forward. Ms. Koch-Sundquist reinforced the importance of the complaint process as SC members are not in a position to field questions and address complaints outside of that process, particularly as these issues can arise when SC members are in the community. Although they feel concern for all issues, they cannot respond outside of the complaint process.

In regards to the Habeeb & Associates report, Superintendent Beaudoin offered to create a suggestion of next steps for the School Committee. Ms. Whitman and Mr. Foster agreed that it would be helpful to react to her proposal. Superintendent Beaudoin plans to build a timeline suggestion into the SC meeting for December 6, 2022.

9) Adjourn

Mr. Foster moved to adjourn the meeting; Ms. Spencer seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, via roll call.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:25 pm

School Committee Future Meetings

- December 6, 2022
- December 20, 2022