

FAQ: Amherst School Building Project
Update for Town Meeting: May 4, 2016

What is the project timeline?

- The process for the Amherst Elementary Schools Building Project (formally the Wildwood Building Project) started in November 2013 when a Statement of Interest (SOI) was accepted by the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) for the Wildwood School. It is worth noting, however, that the initial process actually started with the District submitting SOIs annually since 2007 for both the Wildwood and Fort River Schools to be accepted into the MSBA process. Since Wildwood’s SOI was accepted, the District has continued to submit annual SOIs for Fort River (and have continuously been rejected), including this year. Since the MSBA accepted the Wildwood SOI in November, 2013, the primary steps, as per the MSBA process, have been as follows:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Details</u>
February 2014	An Enrollment Study was completed
May 2014	A presentation requesting funds for a Feasibility Study was made to Amherst Town Meeting
October 2014	A School Building Committee is formed with representatives who are town employees, parents/guardians, teachers, school administrators, school committee members, and community members
April 2015	An Owner’s Project Manager (OPM) is hired using an open process as per statute/MSBA
July 2015	A Designer is hired using the open statutorial/MSBA process
December 2015	The Preliminary Design Program which describes existing conditions, establishes the District’s program for design, and shows possibilities for solutions is submitted to the MSBA
January 2016	The draft schematics of each option were developed and presented to the community and to the Amherst School Committee, and The Amherst School Committee voted for a grade configuration
February 2016	The School Building Committee voted for a preferred schematic layout of the school, and the Preferred Schematic Report was submitted to the MSBA

March/April 2016	Presentations were made to the Facilities Assessment Subcommittee of the MSBA
May 2016	The MSBA Board scheduled to approve the Preferred Schematic Report
June 2016	A Construction Manager hired using the open statutorial/MSBA process, with a contract to begin working with the designer on the plans for the preferred option
August 2016	Project Scope and Budget Documents submitted to the MSBA
September 2016	The MSBA Board scheduled to approve the Proposed Project
Within 120 Days of MSBA Board Approval	Local approval (Town Meeting Vote and Town-wide vote for Debt Override) will be required for the Project Funding

Additionally, there are a few details worth adding:

- The Feasibility Study contract with the MSBA, signed by former Town Manager John Musante, lists the end of the Feasibility Process as January 2017 (see page 7 of this document: <http://bit.ly/1X569cs>).
- An alternative option to what was voted by the Amherst School Committee (for the grade configuration) and the Building Committee (for the design schematic) would not be eligible for MSBA funding. There is no time in the process for this shift to occur, which would need to originate in the Amherst School Committee. Therefore, any estimates that are completed for such an alternative option would not include MSBA funding, which cannot go towards such a project, and would result in Amherst having to forfeit the MSBA grant support (currently estimated at \$34 million for the current project).

What is the plan for the current project?

- The current plan, voted by the Amherst School Committee and the School Building Committee would include a new building, to be built on the site of the current Wildwood School, would host two co-located schools within it. Each school would house about 375 students in grades 2-6. In addition, Crocker Farm School would be converted into an early childhood center for Preschool through First Grade students across the town. The two outdated elementary school buildings (Fort River and Wildwood) would cease to be in operation.

What would be the construction timeline if the project receives approval?

- Construction would begin in the Fall of 2017; Wildwood students would remain in the school during the first phase.
- One co-located school and the core areas (office, cafeteria, gymnasium, etc) would be completed for occupancy in the Fall of 2019.
- The K-6 population of Wildwood would transition to the completed section of the new school for the 2019-2020 school year, while the remaining construction takes place
- The building would be completed for the 2020-2021 school year, when the consolidation would take place.

What is the estimated total cost of the project and the Amherst share of the cost? When will that cost be solidified?

- The local cost is estimated to be at \$30.4 million, coming from a current total project estimate of \$64.5 million (the MSBA is estimated to cover the remaining \$34 million). This cost is typical for school building projects of similar sizes across the Commonwealth over the past few years.
- When the Project Scope and Budget documents are sent to the MSBA in August 2016, they will include the maximum cost of the project. When the MSBA votes to approve in September, they will inform us of the state’s Maximum Facilities Grant, which will finalize the town’s share of the cost.

What is the reimbursement percentage from the MSBA?

- The official reimbursement percentage is 68.3% of the costs. This has been true of what is being reimbursed for the Feasibility Study. However, all MSBA Building Projects realize a lower effective percentage than the official rate as the reimbursement excludes certain costs of a project. Our effective reimbursement rate for the building project is estimated at between 52-55% of the total costs. For the estimate listed on the previous bulleted point, we used 53%.

Where does the MSBA funding come from? Do I already pay into this fund?

- The MSBA has a dedicated revenue stream of one penny of the state’s 6.25-percent sales tax on every purchase. So if you purchase items in Massachusetts, you have been paying into this fund since 2004 when the MSBA was established.

How do teachers rate the current condition of Fort River and Wildwood?

- In 2014, the TELL survey was offered to teachers across the Commonwealth; relevant questions from that survey about building infrastructure with our teachers responses are listed below:
 - 24% of Wildwood teachers agreed with the statement, “The physical environment of classrooms in this school supports teaching and learning” (*compared to 83% state average for elementary schools*)

- 25% of Wildwood teachers agreed with the statement, “Teachers and staff work in a school that is environmentally healthy” (*compared to 72% statewide*)
- 9% of Fort River teachers agreed with the statement, “The physical environment of classrooms in this school supports teaching and learning” (*compared to 83% state average for elementary schools*)
 - *This ranks 990th out of the 992 Massachusetts schools who completed the survey*
- 18% of Fort River teachers agreed with the statement, “Teachers and staff work in a school that is environmentally healthy” (*compared to 72% statewide*)

If the schools have been in such poor shape, why did the Town/District wait so long to get into the MSBA process?

- As listed above, Statement of Interests (SOI’s) for both the Wildwood and Fort River Schools have been submitted each year since 2007. The number of towns trying to get into the MSBA process greatly exceeds their funding capacity, resulting in 90% of SOIs being rejected by MSBA each year.

What are the current designs of the building?

- The current design of the building can be seen at this link: <http://bit.ly/1Obq1TV>. Designing a building is an iterative process; many changes have occurred since our first submittal of this design in early February based on feedback from the MBSA, the Community (from the March Forum), and the School Building Committee, and the iterative nature will continue to evolve over the coming months.

Why is swing space (space where students temporarily move to while construction is occurring for safety purposes) not needed for the preferred option?

- The design of the building is such that swing space is not needed for this project. During phase 1, the first 2/3 of the building will be constructed behind Wildwood, set back far enough away from the existing building so that school can safely continue during this phase of construction. During the summer of 2019, Wildwood students will move to the completed parts of the new building and the old building will be demolished. The rest of the building will be completed during the 2019-2020 school year.

Was the renovation option taken seriously?

- Yes, it certainly was. As listed in the timeline above, draft schematics and a cost estimate were developed for all options and presented at a community forum in January. This presentation can be found at this link: <http://bit.ly/1rrh9Vi>.

What would have the swing space options been under a renovation model?

- The district did an initial analysis of these options. Simply put, it's incredibly challenging to find locations for 420 Wildwood students for two years when construction necessitates that they be educated elsewhere. Our analysis found that the least disruptive option would involve Wildwood students spreading within multiple existing schools while some would remain behind the school in temporary classrooms. Some Wildwood students would attend Fort River School, some would be placed in the East Street Annex (across the street from Fort River), some would be placed in the Middle School (which has a cost to it as it's not a town-owned building), and some would be educated in trailers behind Wildwood. There are multiple unresolved issues with this model, such as parking, transportation, special education services, specials classes, among others.

What about using the Middle School as either swing space or a school building for elementary students?

- In the most recent Regional School Committee meeting on April 12, 2016, the administration shared significant doubts about the feasibility of the Middle School/High School consolidation. To plan for the Middle School to be vacant would be premature at best.
- The Town of Amherst does not own the Middle School building, so governance/legal and financial hurdles would need to be overcome even if it was vacated.

What were some of the reasons the School Committee voted for the reconfiguration?

- Please see the letter that the Amherst School Committee shared with Town Meeting members on this topic at this link: <http://bit.ly/1NiExOX>. The letter is also an Appendix to this document.

What is a co-located school model?

- A co-located school model is one in which two distinct schools, each with their own principal, offices, and teacher teams, are located in one building. District staff visited two co-located schools this year to see how they operated. One was in Acton, MA, one of the highest performing districts in the state. The Merriam and McCarthy-Towne Elementary Schools share a building but each has its own unique school culture. Another visit was to the Cunningham and Collicot Schools in Milton, MA, another high achieving district. Both districts have demographics with over 30% students of color. District staff also talked to staff at a co-located school in an urban setting (Bridgeport, CT), whose building was designed by [JCI](#), the same architects working on the Amherst Building Project. All three sites expressed that the model maintained two distinct schools within one building and had opportunities for staff collaboration that are unique to the model.
- Interestingly, all three of these school buildings are much larger (all over 1000 students) than the proposal for Amherst. We did not hear concerns from these schools about the size of the building being an issue.

- In addition, many operational efficiencies are realized in this model, such as maintaining one heating/cooling system, etc.

How would transportation work in the new option?

- Transportation would operate with all students in K-6 being picked up and dropped off at the same time on one route as they are now. The difference is that bus runs would have two stops (instead of one)--one at the new school and one at Crocker Farm.
- The report completed by a transportation company (found at this link <http://bit.ly/1VHh8cw>) shows a model where two runs are added to the consolidated model; the maximum ride would be reduced to 36 minutes, a minute less than our current model. However, the average run length would still be several minutes higher than the current model, so we recommend adding three or four runs, which would reduce the average run time further. The cost of adding these runs (3 runs total \$165,000; 4 runs total \$220,000) is still substantially lower than the operational savings of consolidation (\$695,000). Even with four added runs, the annual savings would still be approximately \$475,000.

What would the annual operational cost savings be in the new model?

- We anticipate the total to be between \$400,000-\$500,000 a year based on efficiencies created in the new model.
- This savings estimate does not include energy savings, which undoubtedly would occur given the reduction in square footage, energy efficient systems, and the reduction of one heating/cooling/HVAC system due to the reduction of a school building in the district.

How would the new model better control class size?

- By dividing the school population into two groups instead of three, we could “normalize” class sizes in ways that our current model does not allow. Currently, both the Fort River and Crocker Farm schools have enrollments in multiple grade levels that forces the decision to have two larger classes or three very small classes. The new model would have more consistency in the number of sections and avoid having a wide range of class sizes that are currently experienced.

Would neighborhoods be kept together in the new school? Would students from the same neighborhood be in the same wing of the building?

- Yes, they would be. The co-located schools would each have a catchment area that defines its population. Maps of tentative plans for the School Committee to consider in terms of the district were presented in December, 2015, and can be viewed at this link: <http://bit.ly/1SVao7k>. The recommendation of the administration was for the School Committee to vote on a final map in 2018, when enrollments for the new school would be more established.

How would the project affect the current practice of zoning to maintain socio-economic equity between schools?

- This research-based practice would continue; however, this could be achieved without busing students in low-income housing outside their enrollment zone. This practice is inconsistent with our equity goals and we would look forward to ending this practice while maintaining balance in our schools.

What work is being done about the conversation of Crocker Farm to an early childhood center?

- A team of early childhood educators from the district, parents of young children, community members, and administrators are working to develop a vision for the early childhood center. The meetings are being facilitated by an educator with twenty years of experience working in early childhood education in a variety of settings. A document that details this vision will be shared with the Amherst School Committee and the larger community for feedback in August, 2016.

What are costs associated with turning Crocker Farm into an early childhood center? Who bears those costs?

- The town would bear any costs of renovating Crocker Farm. Fortunately, that building was renovated in 2002 and has sufficient facilities for the conversion. It is likely that we would need to lower or replace the toilets and sinks in two existing bathroom areas on the first floor to be more appropriate for younger children, but the cost of this change is minor.

Are there other implications for Crocker Farm? What about for the district-wide preschool that is housed at that site?

- Crocker Farm is currently overcrowded with an increasing number of students. The reconfiguration would ease that issue by reducing the non-preschool population by about 80 students.
- In addition, this reduction would free up classroom spaces to add preschool sections so that additional Amherst children can receive a high-quality, early childhood learning experience that is essential for future academic success.

Are there other Massachusetts districts that have this early childhood model?

- Yes. Over 50 Massachusetts districts have an early childhood center model. Some of those districts are:
 - Ashland
 - Auburn
 - Bedford
 - Belchertown

- Brewster
- East Longmeadow
- Holliston
- Littleton
- Ludlow
- South Hadley
- Weston

How would the footprint of the new building compare to the current Wildwood School?

- Based on a more efficient design and use of two stories, the footprint of the new building would be roughly 20% smaller than the current Wildwood School building.

Where are some of the prior submissions to the MSBA located so I can read about the plans as well as the existing conditions of the Wildwood School?

- The Preferred Schematic Report (sent to the MSBA in February, 2016) can be found at <http://bit.ly/1SsiqS7>; the Preliminary Design Plan (sent to the MSBA in December, 2015) can be found at <http://bit.ly/1N0Ed1t>.

What are the implications for students in specialized special education programs?

- We would maintain the three current specialized programs: Building Blocks, AIMS, and the Integrated Learning Center. However, students in these programs would not need to attend a different school than their neighbors and siblings to receive the services they need to access the curriculum. The current model of moving some of our most vulnerable students outside their districted school, a major equity issue, would end.

Wildwood School has about 420 students now; was it always that size?

- No, it used to have many more students than today. In 1995, 611 students attended school at Wildwood.

How would parking work for major school events such as Open House and student performances?

- Since the co-located schools would not have major events, such as Open Houses, on the same night, additional parking that is not currently available at any of our schools would be present to ease the parking load and improve car safety for these events.

What will happen to the Fort River building?

- That would be a decision for the Town of Amherst. Many potential uses have been discussed, but it would not be a decision for the school district to make.

How long could it be before the MSBA might consider funding an Add/Reno or new building for Fort River?

- It's not clear, but only two districts have received multiple MSBA grants for projects that are over \$30 million. Both districts, Newton (12,674 students) and Plymouth (7,703 students) are substantially larger than the Amherst Public Schools (1,200 students).

What happens if the town does not vote to fund their share of the project and, therefore, we exit the MSBA process?

- Some issues in the buildings, such as the Wildwood boiler and the Fort River roof, will need immediate attention. Others, such as air quality issues, safety concerns, and the quad system that negatively impacts teaching and learning, will need to be addressed at some point in the future

Why weren't simple renovation and updates considered?

- This option was considered; this model is called a "code upgrade". However, the model of renovations would not resolve the quad system that so negatively impacts teaching and learning, the safety issues that come from having the front office far from the main entry, and many other problems with the current structure of the Wildwood and Fort River schools.

Why was Wildwood chosen and not Fort River for this project?

- While both schools are in need of repair, Wildwood is older and has not updated their boiler/heating system, which increased the likelihood of being accepted into the MSBA process.

What happens if our elementary school population increases beyond the estimates of the MSBA and independent consultant who also did enrollment estimates?

- The new building is designed so that an expansion of four classrooms can be added if needed. The dotted lines on the current drawings--found at <http://bit.ly/1Obq1TV> (on slides 3 and 4) show where those classrooms would be

How much community engagement has been done?

- A partial listing of engagement events is listed on the following pages:

<u>Event(s)</u>	<u>Date(s)</u>
Community-wide Forums	9/29/15 @ 3:30P and 7:00P 10/26/15 @ 3:30P and 7:00P 12/8/15 @ 3:30P and 7:00P 1/15/16 @ 6:30P 3/15 @ 6:30 P
School Committee Meetings	03/12/13, 02/04/14, 04/29/14, 10/21/14, 11/25/14, 12/16/14, 01/20/15, 02/10/15, 03/17/15, 04/28/15, 05/17/15, 08/27/15, 09/21/15, 10/20/15, 11/17/15, 12/22/15, 01/14/16, 01/19/16, 02/09/16, 03/23/16; 04/26/16
School Building Committee Meetings	10/21/14, 01/26/15, 02/23/15, 03/26/15, 04/08/15, 07/22/15, 09/15/15, 10/15/15, 11/17/15, 12/22/15, 01/13/16, 01/21/16, 02/02/16, 03/15/16, 04/07/16
Wildwood PGO (Parent/Guardian Organization) Meetings	5/26/15, 10/15/15
Wildwood School Council	4/15/15
Wildwood Staff Meeting	5/13/15, 10/14/15, 10/26/15
Crocker Farm PGO (Parent/Guardian Organization)	10/9/15, 12/21/15
Crocker Farm School Council	04/28/15
Crocker Farm Staff	04/29/15, 09/30/15, 10/21/15
Fort River PGO (Parent/Guardian Organization)	05/08/15, 10/16/15, 01/15/16
Fort River School Council	04/30/15
Fort River Staff	06/02/15, 09/30/15, 10/21/15

Discussions to gather feedback from over 50 staff members (all three buildings represented) on interior spaces in different areas of the building design	5/4/16, 5/5/16
Visioning Group of staff members, families, community members, and administrators identified learning goals and guiding principles and drafted the Educational Program for the Building Project	8/24/15, 9/10/15, 9/24/15, 10/14/15
Forums for Families with children with special needs (co-facilitated by the Special Education Parent Advisory Council)	10/29/15, 11/02/15
Forum for Families with young children/preschoolers	10/13/15
Visioning Group of early childhood staff members, families of young children, community members, and administrators are developing a vision for Crocker Farm as an Early Childhood Center	4/7/16, 5/12/16, 6/16
Forum for Fort River Families and their children	05/05/16
Forum for Wildwood Families and their children	06/16
Forum for Crocker Farm Families and their children	06/16
Family Center Advisory Board	11/18/15
Forum at Applewood Retirement Community	01/16/16
Meeting with Residents of Local Apartment Complexes	02/24/16
Select Board	01/11/16
Finance Committee	02/11/16, 3/31/16, 4/14/16

Amherst Media informational programs	06/9/15 (http://bit.ly/1QQqlqS) , 09/22/15 (http://bit.ly/1W4aT2l) 02/10/16 (http://bit.ly/1OcGQ0l)
Daily Hampshire Gazette/Amherst Bulletin Articles	11/26/13, 09/24/14, 09/16/15, 09/21/15, 10/20/15, 11/03/15, 11/09/15, 01/19/16, 02/3/16
Project Facebook site started with up-to-the-minute updates (link at http://bit.ly/1Tt19st)	07/15
Project Website with all meeting minutes, presentations, etc. started (link at http://bit.ly/21sC6eX)	08/15
Amherst Senior Center	6/16

Appendix A: School Committee Rationale for Reconfiguration Vote

Dear Town Meeting Members,

I would like to respond to the request made by article 38 for additional town funds to be spent on a Feasibility Study for “Repair of Wildwood and Fort River schools”.

In their request for town funds, the petitioners presented to the Select Board and the Finance Committee and represented the Amherst School Committee vote for grade re-configuration, as based primarily on financial considerations. I wish to clarify the School Committee vote.

As an elected representative body, the Amherst School Committee is charged with making decisions based on what is best for our educational community and more specifically, the students we educate in our district.

With that in mind, the Amherst School Committee voted 4-1 to reconfigure our elementary schools. The new configuration will consist of two co-located schools of approximately 375 students each. Each school will have separate administrators, specialists, staff and teachers. Several School Committee members publicly shared their very careful deliberations and thought processes prior to voting. As per the MSBA process, school committees are required to vote on the best option to support their district’s educational plan and students’ needs. In studying the various options, it became clear that renovating the buildings would not result in a learning environment that supported our educational plan which was created by teachers, administrators and other educators in the district.

In their final deliberations, several members spoke about the need for educational equity, which includes access, for all students. This configuration is the only one that addresses some serious barriers to this access for many students in our community.

It also addresses the environmental impact of continuing to run two deteriorating buildings, with poor ventilation, heating and cooling systems that the Committee considered a serious liability to our children’s learning environment. The new building, which will be greener (reaching the LEED Silver rating), more efficient and with a smaller footprint than either Fort River or Wildwood has now, is environmentally more sound and moves the district in the direction of true climate justice.

Another significant concern to the committee and to educators was the potential disruption to education should students need to be moved out of one or more buildings to accommodate simultaneous or concurrent renovations. Amherst does not currently have space for such a move, thus any renovation plan would necessarily include at least four different locations for students currently at Wildwood for a period of more than two years and a cost of over a \$1,000,000 a year. Of course, a Fort River renovation would also be subject to similar costs and relocation efforts.

I would like to briefly quote some of the thoughts and statements made by school committee members in open meeting, prior to the vote:

One committee member stated:

“We live in a beautiful town with an amazing and diverse community that cares passionately about our children and their education”

“While a majority of our students are experiencing the benefits of our system there are children in our community who are not able to access it as successfully.”

“Children with special educational needs would have all the needed resources in the same building in this new configuration”

Another committee member observed:

“For years the community has been rightly demanding that we address glaring inequalities in educational outcomes---specifically the achievement gap”

“The new re-configuration would allow for an expanded pre-school, in particular for children in Amherst who have been denied pre-school seats because of space limitations. This is primarily students whose families cannot afford private pre-school”

“This configuration would eliminate busing and redistricting for any reason whether it be socio-economic balance, overcrowded schools or special education needs.”

“Small class size is a priority as well as a school committee policy; this new configuration allows for the maximum amount of flexibility so that class size can be equalized across grades”

A third committee member wrote:

“Equity means equal opportunity. In looking at the various options for building or renovating our schools, the key word for me is resources. There is only one configuration that provides maximum resources for providing equal opportunity and that is (this re-configured) and consolidated plan.”

These quotes are just a few examples of statements that School Committee members made publicly explaining their commitment to equity that underlies their vote for this building option.

In terms of the cost estimates, as a School Committee member and a member of the Building Committee, and someone who has met several times with the MSBA, it is clear to me that the MSBA process is an involved, thorough and strictly determined one. Each option and its associated costs were arrived at by independent professional estimators. The School Committee, Building Committee and administrators had no contact with said estimators. Additionally, it seems that a state agency that is potentially going to spend \$35,000,000 would not do so - as suggested by the petitioners - with cursory and insufficient cost estimates.

I urge Town Meeting to vote no on the motion put forth by article 38.

Sincerely,

Katherine Appy
Chair, Amherst School Committee