

School Building Committee Meeting Minutes
Remote Online Meeting
September 24, 2020, 5:00PM

Present: Chair Sharon Gray; Vice Chair Thomas Ulfelder; Virginia Ferko; Marjorie Freiman, Steve Gagosian; Joubin Hassanein; Ryan Hutchins; Meghan Jop; Matt King; Melissa Martin; Patti Quigley; Heather Sawitsky; Jose Soliva; David Lussier; Jeff Dees; Grant Smith; FMD Project Manager Kevin Kennedy; FMD Project Manager Dick Elliott; Jeff D’Amico of Compass Project Management; and Alex Pitkin and Kristen Olsen of SMMA.

Absent: Cynthia Mahr, Ellen Quirk.

Ms. Gray opened the meeting at approximately 5:01PM. She announced the meeting was being broadcast live and recorded by Wellesley Media for later viewing. Participants joined via Zoom conferencing, with each vote to be recorded by roll call.

Ms. Gray noted that this is a critical meeting for the SBC, which is charged with choosing a preferred solution for building an elementary school with the Massachusetts School Building Authority. The SBC has looked at many options over the past year during the study of the Hardy and Upham sites, and the purpose of this meeting is to vote on a final option to move forward with.

Ms. Gray noted that whatever the recommendation, the elementary students of the town will benefit from the decision. Combined with the Hunnewell project, which is currently in design, more than 700 students will be served. Upon completion of these projects, for the first time in four or five decades, all elementary students will have an opportunity to be educated in appropriate facilities. This benefit for students is the sole purpose for the work, which has been challenging and at times very uncomfortable. Whatever the decision, she hopes that the community will keep this benefit for the students in mind.

Public Comment

Joelle Reidy of Prospect Street asked the SBC to align its decision to the values of the town. The Town is committed to the environment and supports diversity, equity, and inclusion. Building at Hardy would reflect the Town’s values. As a vocal advocate for school safety, she said she does not see the increased crossings at Route 9 to be a safety risk.

Rich McCarron of Lawrence Road said his experience as a law enforcement officer includes crash prevention and investigations. To focus on pedestrian safety means looking at where children actually walk. Children will not be walking on Route 9. Increasing traffic on quiet streets is a safety hazard to pedestrians; closing Hardy would increase traffic in those quiet neighborhoods.

Andrew Friendly of Willow Road supports rebuilding at Hardy because it will cost millions less, will do less environmental damage, will support its diverse community, will be easier to construct, and is located where children live. He also noted that Hardy neighbors support the project.

Hardy/Upham Project

Community feedback

Ms. Gray said that the SBC has received a letter from an attorney representing a group of Upham neighbors who have hired an engineering consultant, Tetra Tech, to review publicly available information on the project. She asked Mr. Pitkin to weigh in on the letter. He said he respects the notion of peer review, which is common on many projects. The letter does stray very far into reflecting an opinion. It is the viewpoint of SMMA that both sites are attractive and viable sites, and it is up to the SBC to make its decision. Mr. Pitkin said the points outlined in the letter are in many cases conjecture (such as number of truck trips) that will not be evaluated and determined until later in the design process. Some of the cost concerns addressed in the letter have since been addressed.

Ms. Gray recapped the community forum held Sept. 17, a webinar that included a presentation and nearly two hours of comments and questions. Topics included: concerns about ledge and tree removal at Upham; removal of trees at Hardy; traffic; attendance zones; safety on Route 9; walking to school; supporting diversity; and comments from lots of people supporting their neighborhood school. In the past few weeks the SBC has also received hundreds of letters from members of the community.

Mr. King said that it was educational to hear from the community, and noted that it is important to strive for clear communication to the town about the work that is being done. Ms. Ferko noted that wherever students end up going to school, families develop a deep bond with their school community. Having watched two previous redistricting processes in town, she said it has been the experience of the town that in retrospect, children and parents do well settling in quickly after making the change. It is important to keep perspective and understand that in the end, the school assignments will work out as long as students end up in fully adequate school buildings.

Hardy/Upham Site Selection Discussion and Vote

Ms. Gray said in preparation for the vote, it would be valuable for the SBC to consider how to narrow the options and come to a decision. The project team has suggested two approaches: Either narrow to a preferred site and then vote on the best option for that site, or review the options one by one and vote until a solution is reached.

Mr. Ulfelder stated his preference would be to pick a site first, allowing for a focused and collaborative discussion on the best option for that site. He thinks it is important for the town to see that there has been a collaborative, thoughtful process and that consensus can be reached. Ms. Martin said she views it differently, given that as a School Committee member, her priority is to support the construction of a new school in a timely manner. Her preference is for the options that don't necessitate swing space, as opposed to preferring one site over the other.

Mr. King suggested eliminating some of the options if possible to narrow the conversation. Ms. Ferko supports narrowing the options if possible, otherwise she believes it is important to discuss the characteristics of each option and weigh them against each other.

Mr. Hutchins suggested eliminating the options that would require swing space, given that the School Committee is not supportive of using swing space for the project. He does not want to bring forward an option that will fail.

Mr. Hutchins moved to eliminate Hardy Option 4 and Upham Option 6C. Ms. Martin seconded.

Mr. King said he believes they are not ideal options to begin with, particularly the renovation at Hardy. Ms. Gray said she has a soft spot for the idea of the addition/renovation, given the success of the

Sprague building, but it is a problematic option for a number of reasons. Mr. Gagosian said if you have the ability to build at both sites without swing space, why would you move forward with options that require it? Ms. Sawitsky is supportive of eliminating these options to allow for a more focused discussion on the remaining options.

Ms. Gray called for the vote.

Roll Call: Mr. Ulfelder – No, Ms. Ferko – Yes, Ms. Freiman – Yes, Mr. Gagosian – Yes, Mr. Hassanein – Yes, Mr. Hutchins – Yes, Ms. Jop – Yes, Mr. King – Yes, Ms. Martin – Yes, Ms. Quigley – Yes, Ms. Sawitsky – Yes, Mr. Soliva – Yes, Ms. Gray – Yes. **The motion carried 12-1.**

Ms. Ferko asked about the distinction between Hardy option 7B and 7B-R and whether it is useful to have both of them still as options. Mr. Hutchins said that if Hardy is selected, the final option could be more of a meld between the two of them. There is much design work to be done in the next phase. Ms. Ferko asked whether the options can be combined into a Hardy center site location. Mr. Ulfelder said 7B-R was an effort to minimize the retaining walls and other feedback provided by SBC members about fields, circulation, and queuing.

In response to a question from Ms. Freiman, Mr. King said after feasibility is complete the PBC will want to know about the project goals; the approved budget; the goals for site development or what items need attention; and what are desirable features to accommodate. The SBC does not need to tell the PBC exact details about the placement. It's more about ensuring that what is proposed can achieve the project goals.

Ms. Jop said 7B might present a permitting challenge given the height of the proposed retaining walls. Mr. D'Amico said the MSBA will be looking for the SBC to recommend one option. Key factors include description of the projects, massing of the project, height and length, site location, quantity and direction of roadways and tie-ins. The orientation of the building is different in option 7B and 7B-R and might be important to determine now. In the next stage, there will be a fine tuning of topographical study, so there is room to adjust to new information.

Dr. Lussier said any of the remaining options meet educational needs. The 7B-R option feels like it might be oriented the wrong way related to how pedestrians will arrive at the site.

Ms. Quigley asked about the use of the Dover Amendment for retaining walls at Hardy or other permitting challenges. Ms. Jop said the Dover Amendment requires a test of "reasonableness." At Hunnewell, the town is doing the best it can on a very small site and will likely utilize the Dover Amendment to bypass zoning requirements for amount of open space.

Ms. Sawitsky asked about the need for retaining walls in 7B. In order to get the emergency lane behind the buildings, the retaining walls need to be included given that neighboring properties are elevated approximately 15 feet higher than the road would be.

Mr. D'Amico discussed the upcoming MSBA approval process, and what the agency will expect, even while noting that there is still room for option development. They will want to see that the educational program has been finalized.

Ms. Gray said it is her understanding that the traffic consultant, Beta Group, has not reviewed the site circulation of option 7B-R. She noted that given the statements made by Kien Ho of Beta about the improved safety at the Hardy site with three points of ingress/egress, she would prefer that if Hardy is recommended that the SBC would support the three points of connection as part of the recommendation. Ms. Olsen said Beta will thoroughly review the site circulation at the next stage at of whatever option is selected.

Mr. Ulfelder asked if there will be additional cost due to the soft soils of the southern side of the Hardy site. Ms. Olsen said additional costs for over-excavation to achieve a deeper foundation were included in the cost estimates for 7B-R.

Ms. Jop said 7B-R provides a blind spot based on the orientation of the administrative offices away from a view of Weston Road, where 7B might be more properly oriented to the neighborhood and provides more of a visual cue to people approaching. Ms. Freiman said not having a clear sightline to Weston Road with 7B-R is concerning for security reasons. Ms. Gray said with 7B-R, students arriving from the nearby neighborhood would approach to the rear of the building, which seems backward. Mr. Soliva asked whether it could be possible to keep the orientation of 7B but shift it toward the southern side of the site away from the retaining areas.

Mr. Pitkin discussed the various aspects of the two options with the members, including setback requirements, how the classrooms would be oriented and the site topography. Options can be designed to be inviting no matter how they are oriented. Ms. Quigley advocated for making choices that ensure security for students.

Ms. Jop said lot coverage would be a distinct issue on the Hardy site regardless of the option selected. Either option exceeds the zoning bylaw, which requires 25 percent total lot coverage.

Mr. Soliva prefers 7B-R because it addresses the issue of the retaining walls and the limitations of the play areas in 7B. But it would need to be further developed in the next phase, when security and the visual impact of the front and the back can be reviewed. Mr. Pitkin said he is concerned about ambient noise from Route 9 and 7B-R may do a better job of addressing that.

The Committee discussed the pros and cons of each option. Mr. Hutchins made a motion to eliminate Hardy option 7B-R, and continue to study Hardy option 7B addressing some of the concerns of the SBC that have been raised during the discussion, including retaining walls, field access, and road access. Ms. Quigley seconded.

Ms. Martin clarified that Mr. Hutchins' intent was to narrow the discussion further to Hardy 7B, with revisions based on the discussion, and Upham 6A. Mr. Hutchins confirmed and Ms. Gray called for the vote.

Roll Call: Mr. Ulfelder – Yes, Ms. Ferko – Yes, Ms. Freiman – Yes, Mr. Gagosian – No, Mr. Hassanein – Yes, Mr. Hutchins – Yes, Ms. Jop – Yes, Mr. King – Yes, Ms. Martin – Yes, Ms. Quigley – Yes, Ms. Sawitsky – Yes, Mr. Soliva – No, Ms. Gray – Yes. **The motion carried 11-2.**

Ms. Gray asked the Committee to discuss the merits of the remaining options, Upham 6A and Hardy 7B.

Mr. Hutchins said in evaluating the criteria, many became neutral in his view. In thinking about the remaining criteria, he began to think about what were more permanent: cost, removal of ledge and

trees, and spending additional money on swing space; and what criteria could be more temporary: including redistricting, construction impacts, traffic and the amount of emissions. The amount of traffic on Weston Road may change because of future developments. While he acknowledges that he is a parent of Hardy students and his wife is a teacher there and that people may expect him to vote accordingly, he took a thorough, serious view of what is permanent and how the town impacted in the long term. Cost became the biggest driver for him along with the removal of trees, especially with the amount of time needed to regrow a forest.

Mr. Soliva said he took an opposite view related to permanence. Whichever site chosen will be a good one, but in thinking about the criteria, he thinks cost, site condition and even the removal of the trees can be mitigated or is temporary, while the placement of the school north of Route 9 is permanent. Crossing Route 9 is a concern and a valid one. The removal of forest and ledge at Upham would be disappointing, but to better utilize the site you should place the building in the middle. Conservation accepts reforestation as a mitigation plan, even if it is not preferred. The parcel of land would serve the community, so mitigation is acceptable. The additional cost would provide the community with superior attendance zones, with less traffic and more walkability, and potentially increased safety. But he reiterated that he sees merits to both sites.

Ms. Martin agreed that both sites have challenges but also benefits. She is pleased that reasonable people can come to different conclusions, because it means that both are viable sites for an elementary school building. Regarding safety and the attendance zones, she agrees that one map has a cleaner look, but there have been students crossing Route 9 for 20 years to go to elementary school and she does not have concerns about the safety of either of the proposed maps. As a School Committee member, she wants to be a thoughtful steward of the town's funds. It is also important to recognize that the town is determining to build one school now, with the other site being held by the School Committee for building in the future when there is sufficient enrollment to support it. Finally, in building a school that is designed to be net zero energy-ready, she is more supportive of not putting forward an option that requires removal of so many trees.

Ms. Ferko agreed with Ms. Martin's last statement, adding that the town has another very good option, so there is no need to remove the ledge and tree canopy at this time. She takes seriously the concerns of the Upham neighbors who have written the SBC asking that it recommend waiting to build Upham at a later time. Related to traffic and safety concerns, she notes that throughout the town, there are all sorts of reasons why walking is not chosen as an option. On most days, for most families, students go to school in a car. It is aspirational to promote walking, but every parent must assess the readiness of their child and what their schedule is, and figure out a safe transportation plan. The School Committee has provided two safe maps, and families will figure out a safe option for their child to get to school and they will adjust.

Mr. Ulfelder said to him the most important criteria are not neutral. He believes the additional \$3.5 million for the three lots for Hardy should be considered given that the purchase made Hardy a viable location for the school. When adding the cost of the purchase to the projected cost of building at Hardy, it brings the cost close enough to Upham's cost to make that issue neutral. Traffic and movement of people through town across Route 9 is not ideal when you have another option that does not require the same mass movement. The attendance zones make this issue very clear; there is no need to continue to live with difficult attendance zones. He takes seriously the responsibility to the environment, but these are school properties for the purpose of educating the children. Blasting would be in the hands of a capable contractor, and there is an ability to mitigate the tree loss by planting 500-plus trees

at the Upham site in deeper topsoil. He also believes the issue of sustainability has not been properly accounted for when it comes to carbon emissions related to cars and traffic. All of this weighs in favor of building at the Upham site, despite the temporary issue of removing the ledge. Permitting will be more straightforward, and would allow for more field space at Hardy before a seventh school is built.

Ms. Sawitsky believes that cost is important, and if a more expensive option is selected, the SBC will need to provide an explanation to the town. She is concerned about additional costs at Upham, over and above those already known, including blasting mitigation costs, stormwater management, potential litigation by neighbors, and construction delays because of additional time it may take to prepare the site. She does not support including the \$3.45 million for the Hardy parcels as part of the project cost. She also would prefer to preserve the forest at Upham, maintaining it as long as possible until a seventh school is needed. There is an important communal aspect to the Hardy school location. If this school will be a community resource, it will be a convenience to the town. Ms. Sawitsky became involved in town government when Sprague was being rebuilt. There have been swings in populations and it is difficult to project who will be living where in the future. One of the drawbacks of Upham is its proximity to Bates, and building it now limits the flexibility for accommodating students town-wide.

Mr. Hassanein said in considering the criteria he eliminated many of them as being neutral. The Town is fortunate to have the opportunity to have both sites to build on, and his evaluation was very close. In reviewing the remaining criteria, he took cost out of the equation and evaluated whether the cost justified the additional expense. He said blasting in commercial settings is different than in residential settings, but undeniably it is a bigger impact to build at Upham. The decision to remove the trees and fauna from the Upham site when there is an alternative is also an advantage for building at Hardy. An advantage for building at Upham is that it would be less impactful to traffic, given the fact that Weston Road will continue to be a main artery. The walkability and bikeability aspect of the attendance zones for Upham are also an advantage. All those factors together were somewhat neutralized in Mr. Hassanein's estimation, with a very slight advantage to building at Upham, but in looking at the cost differential, he could not envision asking the taxpayers to pay for this minor advantage.

Ms. Jop looked at it from the perspective of what school will be built first, and what will be built later. Recognizing that, is there a site where a better school could be built later where the design would be improved without having to work around students? She also factored in the 2 to 3 north-south connections that impact all vehicular movement north of Route 9 – Weston Road, Cliff Road, and parts of Cedar Street. The attendance zones with an Upham build funnel traffic to an east-west pattern, and also improves the walkability and bikeability. She wrestles with the removal of trees at Upham, but notes that the site is meant for school purposes and to meet educational needs. The Hardy site option does not comply to the town zoning bylaws, and through permitting could require modifications that might impact the educational design. If you build at Upham first, it allows for better use of the Hardy site in the future by being able to build at the front. The Hardy site also includes construction challenges that you would not see at a less constrained site like Upham. The removal of trees can be mitigated, so she supports choosing the larger, more compliant site.

Mr. King noted for the public that there has been no lawsuit or notice of intent to file a lawsuit. He also said that he is a member of the PBC, but has served on the SBC as a private citizen and will be neutral in his views whichever project moves forward. He noted that what strikes him about Upham is that it is a true neighborhood. He agrees with Ms. Jop that one could design a better school at Hardy if there was a chance to build it later. He also is reluctant to contribute any further to traffic challenges on Weston Road near the Hardy site. The parcels on Route 9, and the entrance and exit off the back of the site is

critical to Hardy working, and in his mind you cannot separate the cost of acquisition of the properties, because it makes the site workable. He added that this was a hard decision with two good options and two engaged neighborhoods, so the town will benefit either way.

Mr. Gagosian said he tried to look at it from the perspective of the overall town capital plan, and how you sequence the projects to mitigate the deficiencies of each site. It is a big job to reconfigure the Upham site, but its geometry enables a school of this size to be built comfortably. At Hardy, the fragmented geometry of the site creates a problem with siting and vehicular circulation and pedestrian access. Weston Road at the underpass would need further study and perhaps some design changes. Building at Upham first creates the opportunity to build a smaller school on a smaller site at Hardy later without the need for the specialized program. At this point in terms of a capital sequence, he prefers Upham and then Hardy.

Ms. Ferko said she fails to understand how you include the cost of acquiring the parcels at Hardy as part of the project cost, given that they will not be part of the request at the debt exclusion. It would be a different calculation if the town were planning to sell off parcels it did not need. Mr. King noted that he disagrees with this viewpoint.

Ms. Freiman said safety and attendance zones were key factors for her, and it would not make sense to increase the number of students crossing Route 9 daily when there is another choice. Route 9 at Weston Road and Oak Street are problematic intersections. The attendance zones for an Upham build favor an equal distribution of school age population. Projected population growth could go either way. She has reviewed the materials from the School Facilities Committee as well as the HHU Master Plan Committee, which both recommended building at Upham. She supported those decisions then, and all the work on the SBC has reinforced her support of those decisions. Mitigating any traffic on Weston Road would be a costly and time-consuming operation. An Upham build has a net positive effect on intersections compared with a Hardy build. She noted that Wellesley is a Tree City USA and she has concerns about tree removal, but believes that replanting at Upham might be better in deeper soil. She noted zoning and permitting also seem easier at Upham.

Ms. Gray said she agreed with the majority who have stated that each site is desirable with its own unique characteristics. One is more walkable to town, and one is more nestled into a quiet neighborhood. Those are characteristics that appeal to many people, and both are valuable for a school. Given all the analysis and work over the past five years, having been a part of the project on multiple committees, the only way she can evaluate this decision is by thinking about tradeoffs. Having been on the MPC, choosing Upham at the time was a more logistical issue given the limitations of the Hardy site. The purchase of the three properties have made Hardy viable. But the Town will need to ask for more money on top of that cost. A tradeoff that she has struggled with the most is the idea of crossing Route 9. As a resident of the Upham neighborhood, she understands the inconvenience of that, on top of the concerns about losing a neighborhood school. But, she said that those families in the Sprague neighborhood north of Route 9 typically consider Sprague to be their neighborhood school, and have over the years voiced support of staying districted to Sprague. She also noted that the SBC has worked very hard to create building plans that reflect Net Zero Energy standards, and she has a hard time with the idea of asking the town to fund a school built to these standards while at the same time cutting down so many trees at Upham. The carbon sequestration numbers are measurable and meaningful to her. Upham is a School Committee property and there will be a time to use that property, with ledge and trees removed, but would prefer that Hardy be built first.

Ms. Quigley favors building at Hardy as well, but agrees that both sites are excellent and education at either will be amazing. The redistricting maps favor an Upham build, but that was not a critical factor for her. Wellesley does a great job of making all families feel welcome. Buying the three houses along Route 9 made it possible for this building to be viable at Hardy, so even if the costs for the parcels are not included, that fact should be acknowledged. The traffic at Hardy is a concern, but traffic town-wide is an issue and should be the next big topic to consider. Earlier discussion about project sequencing was very persuasive, but she believes rebuilding at Upham would be better second, to avoid taking out all the ledge and forest. She said it would be a bit hypocritical to put a sustainable building on a site that had to be leveled in that way.

Ms. Gray thanked the Committee members for all their thoughtful comments. Ms. Quigley thanked Ms. Gray and Matt Kelley for the work they have done on these projects.

Mr. Ulfelder noted that he does not find it problematic to take down the trees to build a net zero energy school, as the tree loss would be mitigated as part of the project. He believes Upham is a better choice in terms of traffic and carbon mitigation. Ms. Ferko said she wanted to note that the SBC has heard from organizations and individuals who have a town-wide perspective and a record of leadership on environmental issues who have recommended us to retain the tree canopy at Upham. Mr. King noted that the Upham site is a school site and it should not be viewed as conservation land.

Ms. Martin expressed appreciation for all SBC members who have dedicated so many volunteer hours in supporting the work of the committee over the years.

Mr. Hutchins moved that the School Building Committee select the new construction option 7B on the Hardy school site as the recommended preferred schematic option. Ms. Ferko seconded.

Roll Call: Mr. Ulfelder – No, Ms. Ferko – Yes, Ms. Freiman – No, Mr. Gagosian – No, Mr. Hassanein – Yes, Mr. Hutchins – Yes, Ms. Jop – No, Mr. King – No, Ms. Martin – Yes, Ms. Quigley – Yes, Ms. Sawitsky – Yes, Mr. Soliva – No, Ms. Gray – Yes. **The motion carried 7-6.**

Mr. King said he will support either option and congratulated the Committee for its work. Mr. Hutchins thanked his fellow SBC members and thanked Ms. Gray for her effort and energy in supporting schools for students.

The committee decided to hold invoices to the following week. In response to a question from Ms. Quigley, Mr. D'Amico said the MSBA would be looking for votes from the School Committee and Selectmen to affirm the work of the SBC.

Ms. Gray adjourned the SBC meeting at 8:01 p.m.