

AHS Building Committee

Opening Remarks – MSBA Update discussion (9.17.18)

Jeff Thielman, AHS Building Committee Chairperson

I want to take a moment to thank everyone who staffed our booth on Town Day, especially Amy, Kirsi, Tobey and the rest of the Communications subcommittee. A special thanks as well to Daniel Ruiz for providing us with a tent for the day and to Lori, Jim and Victoria for being there as well. It was a wonderful opportunity for us to listen to varying points of view on the building project.

Hundreds of people came into our booth during the day leading to many thoughtful conversations.

I heard two consistent points on Saturday. One is something we have known all along – Arlington is united in its desire to create a better educational space for our high school students as soon as we possibly can. Everyone we spoke with agreed that the current state of Arlington High School is not acceptable.

The second point people consistently made was how pleased they are with the transparency of our process. Many people praised us for sharing information, conducting surveys, holding forums and placing so much information on our website, which is the most detailed we can find of any building project in the state.

For sure, some visitors expressed concerns about our vote three months ago to build a new facility rather do a renovation/addition, which would have maintained buildings constructed in 1914 and 1938. Others supported the idea of a new school but wanted it to feature some of the elements of the old buildings. Several people stopped me during the day, however, to urge us to stay with our decision, Alternative 3A.

Many wanted further justifications about the costs of the project. Several had concerns about where students would be during construction and how construction would impact teaching and learning.

A lot of people asked whether the new school would be large enough for our growing student body. There were folks who approached me and said we should build Arlington High School as large as possible without concerns about costs. Some current high school students were envious of the space in the proposed auditorium in Alternative 3A, and a few current students pointed out that the option shown in our Town Day booth had more green space directly accessible and available to them than the green space at the current high school.

A group of 8th graders wanted to know if the planned building schedule would result in the closing of the school for a semester or so during their high school years, making it possible for them to do something else besides study. I assured them that was not going to happen.

I found the conversations we had on Saturday reassuring because they were identical to what the Building Committee has wrestled with for nearly two years. There was no issue raised that we had not delved into rather deeply here in this room.

It is important for people to know that the High School Building Committee has engaged in a very collaborative process. No one person dominated our discussions.

To date, the AHS Building Committee has met 31 times, all in open session. We held our first meeting in December of 2016, and every meeting has allowed for public participation. We have had five public forums and 17 subcommittee meetings. In the months ahead, we will continue to have public forums, public meetings and surveys.

The mandate of the Massachusetts School Building Authority is that towns are to build facilities that meet the school's educational vision. Our responsibility, therefore, is to do what is best for our students, for teaching and learning. That duty has driven every decision we made.

As the committee sifted through the volumes of information we received during the past two years, we listened to one another, to the architects, and to the community. Some Committee members came to this process with a definitive perspective of what the school should look like. Over time, as we listened and learned, opinions shifted.

Let me take a few minutes to refresh everyone's memory about how we got to this point.

In 2013, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) placed Arlington High School on warning status citing inadequate classrooms, science labs and technology infrastructure, which affect the overall learning environment for our students. We have until 2023, the next accreditation visit, to be on the path to addressing the issues NEASC raised.

In April of 2015, Arlington submitted a Statement of Interest to the MSBA indicating that we wanted to partner with the state to study ways we could improve our high school facility. This was our second statement of interest submission, by the way. In May of 2016, the MSBA invited the Town into the eligibility period, and in September of 2016, the town formed the High School Building Committee. In July of 2017, we selected our Owner's Project Manager, and in October 2017, we took part in a process with the MSBA to select HMFH Architects as our Project Designer.

In January and February of 2018, teachers, administrators, parents and community members participated in visioning sessions to develop an educational plan for the new school. The educational plan formed the basis of the designs developed by HMFH, which we shared with the public. Our educational plan, which our principal, Dr. Janger, wrote, received high praise from the MSBA Board of Directors as one of the best plans they had ever seen. In March of 2018, we studied other sites for the school and concluded that AHS needed to remain right here, in its current location. Not surprisingly, there is no other place in town large enough for it.

In April of 2018, we concluded that the option of only renovating Arlington High School would not meet the educational plan nor would it accommodate expected enrollment growth. This was a critical milestone for Arlington because we verified that to maintain accreditation we had two options – build a new school or do a renovation/addition.

Between April and June, we met multiple times to learn about various design alternatives, we shared these alternatives with the community, and we solicited feedback.

In June, we decided that the best thing to do for future generations of Arlington's students was to build a new school. We chose Alternative 3A because it met the educational plan, avoided a potentially costly and much higher-risk renovation of buildings constructed in 1914 and 1938, responded to community desires for a new facility, retained some of the green, and minimized student disruption and modular costs. As we will learn tonight, Alternative 3A provides a more efficient and more accessible use of green space for students and teachers to gather, learn, and build community.

Based on the community forums we held, the feedback we collected in questionnaires, and the conversations we had as a group, we understood that it was impossible to select a design that everyone in Arlington would embrace. But, make no mistake, this committee is excited about the potential that Alternative 3A presents for our young people.

I want to be very clear with those who passed out fliers at Town Day in opposition to the project. Renovating Fusco and Collomb House cannot happen unless a majority of the Committee votes to reverse our June decision. We would be the first district in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to request permission to change a preferred schematic design vote.

Such a decision would have major repercussions: we would have to drop back a phase in the MSBA schedule. We may be asked to re-do the entire feasibility study; at a minimum we would need to re-do the Preferred Schematic Report (PSR) and appear again before the MSBA Board of Directors, after a thorough process of review by MSBA staff and the MSBA's design subcommittee.

This would delay the project by at least 6 to 12 months, and there is no guarantee that we would be accepted back in line for funding. The MSBA will not cost-share for two feasibility studies, which means Town Meeting will have to allocate funds for this work.

The entire project would be delayed. Because of cost escalation, any future construction project would cost more. We estimate that to be approximately \$800,000 for each month we delay the project.

I believe we have made the best decision for Arlington's students, and that is what the MSBA has charged us with doing. Ultimately, it is what the people of Arlington want us to do.

Nevertheless, anyone on this committee is free to make any motion you wish relative to the design process, and we will discuss it.

Let me be very clear. The vote we took in June precludes the renovation of Fusco and Collomb House. The architects, however, will look at ways to reuse elements of both buildings in the new school, and they will present at least one option that recreates the current look of AHS in a new facility.

This committee wants to work with everyone in the community to build a great high school. We do not want to delay the process or further increase costs. To do so, we have to keep a few things in mind.

First, as our committee learned, no one who engages in this process authentically and honestly can approach it with one sole solution to the future design of Arlington High School. Building a new high school on a site with limited space, contamination throughout the site, and students on the property while we build is complex. Anyone who says otherwise has not studied this project carefully.

Secondly, the work we are doing, like everything we do in the field of education, is humbling. I think everyone on the committee is humbled by the task of building a school that will be used by young people who have yet to be born. I think humility is a good quality to have for those who want to engage in this process.

Finally, it is important to get the facts and to speak truthfully. I have seen publications saying that a renovation/addition is less expensive to build than a new school. Those who attended our meetings and read all of the information we published on our website know this is false. There is no such thing as cheaper, faster, AND better. In fact, our cost estimators showed us that a renovation would cost \$9 million to \$25 million more, and it would not have the same potential to meet our net-zero sustainability goal.

We want to work with everyone in Arlington who has an interest in this project. But, please understand that the constraints and tradeoffs involved in this huge project mean that everyone will have something in the final design that they wish could be different.

There is a give and take to this process, and we welcome everyone in the community to get involved, get the facts, tell us your thoughts, and join us in building something truly great for the thousands of students who will attend Arlington High School in the decades to come.