

AHS Building Committee Forum – September 24, 2018
Project Update - Jeff Thielman, AHS Building Committee Chair

These remarks were made in conjunction with [this](#) presentation.

My name is Jeff Thielman, the Chair of the Arlington High School Building Committee, and I want to welcome you to our sixth public forum. Thank you for coming tonight.

We have two goals this evening. The first is to give you a project update, and the second is to share some site design ideas the architects are developing.

The project update portion of the forum will give you an overview of where we are in the process, including the reasons why the committee chose to build a new school. During this part of the meeting, we will discuss the current cost estimates of the project, and Jim Burrows, who represents the town's Owners Project Manager, Skanska, will provide financial information.

The second part of the meeting, scheduled to last about one hour, will be a chance to learn more about the site, including program opportunities on the front green and other outdoor spaces. Lori Cowles of HMFH will lead this part of the meeting.

The forum will conclude by 9:00 p.m.

At the next forum on October 24, the architects will present various exterior designs for the new facility, and we know many in the community are eager for this discussion. The design team has been working on various alternatives, which the building committee will see at our meetings on October 2 and October 16.

We also will have a forum on November 27, and another one in late January or early February.

The facility

It is important to begin our conversation by reminding everyone how unique the Arlington High School facility is. The building houses four separate programs: a high school of 1,390 students; the town's pre-school, called Menotomy Preschool, with just under 100 children; the LABBB collaborative, which is a partnership with Lexington, Burlington, Bedford and Belmont to provide holistic special education services to children; and the town's thriving Community Education program.

The LABBB collaborative occupies four classrooms at AHS plus a lunch area and quiet space. Federal and state laws mandate that the town provide pre-school services to children with learning disabilities, and those children represent about half of the Menotomy Preschool population. It is worth noting that students from Arlington High School work in the preschool as part of their child study course. The costs of building the preschool and LABBB spaces are partly reimbursable by the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

In addition, the town comptroller's office, the facilities department, district offices, and the town's payroll department are located at the high school. The Town is working on a plan to move the Comptroller's Office to Town Hall and the Facilities office to the renovated Department of Public Works complex. HMFH is performing an analysis to determine if the Town can retrofit the Parmenter School so

it can serve as space for district administration and payroll. The Town Manager also is studying whether it is possible to move the payroll department to Town Hall. There are costs to taxpayers for all of this work, if it takes place and is possible.

We are building on a complicated site. The high school campus is a little more than 22 acres, while the MSBA target is that a high school should be located on a property with a minimum of 25 acres. We do not have all of the space we would like. The Building Committee studied other places for the high school, but not surprisingly, the next largest parcel in town with available space is about 16 acres.

There are gas and chromium contaminants throughout the site, which we have capped with clean soil, asphalt and the buildings, and they require testing twice per year.

The third area of complexity for this site is that the Department of Public Works or DPW occupies space to the west of the high school. The DPW facility is undergoing a renovation that impacts the high school rebuild project. Our architects, HMFH, are in regular communication with the DPW design team.

Community Conversations and the Building Committee

In recent weeks, there have been many discussions about the Arlington High School building project. This is entirely appropriate given its scope and cost. The conversations many in town are having about costs, the site, the front lawn, parking, traffic, the school's original buildings and its façade, and whether the committee should have voted to build a new building or do a renovation/addition are identical to the discussions the Building Committee has had over the past 18 months.

I find it reassuring that people across Arlington and the Building Committee are wrestling with the same questions.

Everyone in this room and on the Committee appreciates how passionate people are about Arlington, about our schools, and certainly about our children. Our passion for education in Arlington aligns perfectly with the mandate of the Massachusetts School Building Authority to build a high school that meets the educational vision Arlington has for its students.

Since late 2016, almost two years ago, the Building Committee has met on average twice per month, held public forums, conducted surveys, and engaged with hundreds of people at Town Day and in other venues. One thing that is very clear to us is that Arlington is united in a collective desire to create a better educational space for our high school students as soon as we possibly can.

Process

We are a short nine months away from a likely town-wide vote on a brand-new high school. So, let me take a few minutes to refresh everyone's memory about how we got to this moment.

We formally began this journey in April of 2015 when the Town submitted a Statement of Interest or SOI to the MSBA indicating that we wanted to partner with the state to study ways we could improve our high school. This was our second statement of interest submission. We submitted the SOI because the high school has multiple inadequate classrooms, science labs, and technology infrastructure, which affect the overall learning environment for our students.

AHS is a collection of buildings constructed in different eras, with a less than desirable and confusing layout. The building just does not work as a 21st century school. In fact, our accrediting agency, the New

England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), put the high school on warning status for our facilities in 2013, a point we noted in our Statement of Interest submission.

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 late 2017, in partnership with the MSBA, we selected Skanska as our Owner's Project Manager and HMFH Architects as our Project Designer.

In January and February of 2018, Dr. Matthew Janger, the high school principal, led the effort to develop educational program, which formed the basis of the design alternatives developed by HMFH last spring.

The Educational Program

The educational program was developed through a highly collaborative process that involved school faculty, community members and parents who came together to envision a high school that Arlington will need in the decades ahead. The plan covers all aspects of the high school experience, and dictates the spaces that will be included in the new building. MSBA Board members had high regard for the resulting plan, and I encourage you to go to our website to read it.

The Educational Vision

What is more exciting than the plan is the educational vision behind it. The vision addresses the student experience at Arlington High School, and how it will change with a brand-new facility.

A top priority is that the building be welcoming, accessible, and easy to navigate, which is not the case today. The space itself will be conducive to supporting the social and emotional health of our students. This is so important in an era in which student anxiety is on the rise. A large, central, learning commons, which people my age call a library, will allow research, study, and collaborative group work that is essential to 21st century careers.

Students will get hands-on experience in STEM, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics) and makerspaces. All classes will be better able to do project-based and personalized learning, and the vision calls for up-to-date technology to be woven seamlessly into the building. Students will have access to outstanding art and music instruction as they do now. By creating an environment where teacher interaction is encouraged, the new school will foster the development of interdisciplinary courses and instruction. The many different, new kinds of spaces – gathering, display, breakout, and performance – all support a more collaborative and innovative approach to learning.

Finally, the space will be flexible and sustainable, supporting Arlington High School as a hub of learning, activity and engagement for our students and community, not just for now, but also well into the future. The educational vision is exciting and speaks to the aspirations and hope we have for our students and for our town.

Design Decision

In April of 2018, our design team concluded that the option of only renovating Arlington High School would not meet the educational program nor would it accommodate expected enrollment growth. This left us with two options – build a new school or do a renovation/addition.

Between April and June, the building committee met multiple times to learn about various design alternatives, we shared these alternatives with the community, and we solicited feedback. Building Committee members listened to one another, to the community, and to the design team

Based on the community forums we held and the feedback we collected, we knew that it was impossible to select a design that everyone in Arlington would embrace. But, the committee had to make a choice. After carefully weighing the trade-offs for all of the options, the committee chose Alternative 3A, a new facility, and we are enthusiastic about the potential this alternative has for Arlington's students.

The Committee engaged in a very public and careful voting process. On June 19th, we took a straw poll vote, and the vast majority of the committee supported Alternative 3A, the design we ultimately chose. On June 26, 2018, the Committee took two votes. First, members ranked their first, second, third, and fourth choices. The first choice for nearly all members was Alternative 3A. Then, we took a roll call vote that night, with only one member voting for a renovation/addition, which would have extended to the front lawn. No one supported Alternative 1, which would have retained the entire front lawn and parking areas.

Choosing Alternative 1, which would have resulted in renovating Fusco and Collomb Houses, would have meant two years without an auditorium for our students followed by two years without a gym. In addition to being more costly, this option would have required placing students in trailers during construction, something we are trying to avoid. This alternative, we felt, was too disruptive to the academic and extracurricular life of the high school.

At last week's meeting, a member of the Building Committee felt it was important to reaffirm our decision, and thus made a motion to reopen the design process. Several members of the committee explained why they chose Alternative 3A, including some who explained how their thinking evolved. After discussion, the Committee voted unanimously against the motion.

We chose Alternative 3A because it meets the educational plan, avoids a potentially costly and much higher-risk renovation of buildings constructed in 1914 and 1938, responds to community desires for a new facility, retains some of the green, and minimizes student disruption and modular costs. Alternative 3A is less expensive than the design/renovation options, and it provides the best path to a net-zero facility, one in which the energy used by the building is roughly equal to the amount of renewable energy created by the site. As you will learn in the second part of tonight's forum, Alternative 3A provides a more accessible use of green space for students and teachers to gather, learn, and build community.

Schematic Design Phase

The diagrams you have seen so far are NOT a design; they are massing concepts. We are at the beginning of the schematic design phase. HMFH will design the look and feel of the building and the whole campus with enough detail to establish a much more precise scope, budget and schedule than we had at the end of the feasibility study.

The architects will create a much more attractive facility than the boxes you have seen so far, and the community will have numerous opportunities to weigh in on multiple aspects of the building, including green space, exterior façade and interior features.

The Schematic Design schedule calls for the Town to sign a Project Scope and Budget agreement with the MSBA in April of 2019, a vote by Town Meeting in May, and a debt exclusion vote by the town's voters this coming June. If the vote is successful, the MSBA will authorize the town and the design team to complete the design documents and develop a construction schedule.

Alternative 3A

We realize that many people have a fondness for the current look of Arlington High School. It has an attractive façade and front green. For those who want to preserve the look and feel of the building, we ask that you give time to the architects tonight to talk about their plans for the front lawn and green spaces. We also invite you to future meetings to see the exterior designs they are currently developing. We charged the architects with creating at least one design that honors the look of the current high school as well as designs that reuse physical elements of the current building.

HMFH will present exterior design alternatives to the community at a public forum on October 24.

Cost

I would like to address the important issue of cost. The Town based early budget ranges, which were included in the Owner Project Manager and Designer Requests for Services proposals, on comparative data from other projects. The early numbers did not contemplate the complexities and unique features of our site nor did they consider our educational plan because we had not written it.

The current estimate of \$308 million is a big and even shocking number. Let me be clear that the Committee views this as the high-water mark in the process and recognizes that the taxpayers of Arlington need to feel that the cost represents a valuable and necessary investment.

So, why is the current estimate so high, and what are we doing about it?

The non-educational functions I mentioned earlier are one major factor. The MSBA process required us to include every possible space in our proposal. We can pare the project down after MSBA approval at the conclusion of the feasibility study, but we cannot add more space to the project in the phase we are in now. So, until there is a clear plan for where to house various Town administrative functions, we have provided for all of them in the current cost estimates. We did not make decisions about the relocation of offices earlier because opportunities, like the potential use of Parmenter, arise over time.

Another factor is that the MSBA has a strict formula for the space a high school needs, including art, theater, athletic, classrooms, and science labs. The MSBA approved a school of 1,755 students, and their template projects a certain number of classrooms and other spaces based on that enrollment number.

Because of the educational plan, the Building Committee directed the architects to design a school that included spaces beyond the MSBA template. Specifically, the design calls for six larger classrooms, two additional labs, 16,500 gross square feet of physical education space, a performing arts center with as many seats as we currently have, more art and music space, and a larger learning commons, because the educational plan calls for it to be the heart of the school.

The Building Committee strongly favors these additional spaces because we feel they are necessary to keep Arlington High School as one of the top-rated secondary schools in the Commonwealth. We expect

to have many conversations within the Building Committee and with the community about the value of these additional spaces.

Many of these areas are ones that the MSBA template caps, but the Building Committee feels we need larger spaces given our projected enrollment. For example, the MSBA calls for the auditorium to fit two-thirds of the high school enrollment, with a cap of 750 seats. Our current auditorium holds 900 people, and we want the new one to do as well. The MSBA formula allows for a 12,000 gross square foot gym plus 3,000 square feet of auxiliary physical education space, and we seek to exceed this limit.

The Building Committee and the MSBA will carefully scrutinize the budget for this project. MSBA staff, who have access to data from all of the building projects in the state, will review every cost of the final design. They will examine what the design team's cost estimators develop, compare it to the market and their experience, and ensure that the Town and state spends every dollar wisely. The finance team in the Town Manager's office will review expenses as well, and our Owner's Project Manager will monitor and work to contain costs before and during construction.

Lessons

Before I turn this over to Jim Burrows of Skanska, let me leave you with a few thoughts. 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 has learned, no one who engages in this process authentically and honestly can approach it with simple solutions. 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.

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.

Thirdly, 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.

Finally, the educational plan and vision is what is guiding the design and development of the new Arlington High School. We are very proud of the educational plan for AHS, and we need the community's support and participation to ensure that we can incorporate the guiding principles of the plan into the final design of the new school.

Thank you for listening. I will now turn the podium over to Jim Burrows.