



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

JOSEPH A. CURTATONE
MAYOR

To: The Honorable Board of Aldermen

From: Brad Rawson, OSPCD and Kristen Stelljes, CPA/SomerStat

Cc: Joseph A. Curtatone, Mayor; Superintendent Mary Skipper; Michael F. Glavin; Emily Monea; Dick Bauer

Subject: Process for school playground and school area improvements

Date: September 13, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to update the honorable Board of Aldermen on the process for prioritizing school playground and school area improvement projects (Agenda item 203877, July 13, 2017). As you know, the City strives to administer a transparent, data-driven process for open space project prioritization, as called for in the recently published [2016-2023 Somerville Open Space & Recreation Plan](#).

Background

Traditionally, project selection has primarily been driven by funding parameters of grant programs such as the state Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities (PARC) program or the federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. The City has an excellent track record of using these outside funding sources to help rehabilitate open space facilities while minimizing costs to local taxpayers. However, these financing sources have their limitations: schoolyards are generally ineligible for PARC funding because they are typically closed to general public use during the school day. Federal CDBG funding is limited to certain geographic areas of the City that meet household income guidelines established by the federal government.

At the same time, the City has recognized the need to improve the schoolyards in our community that are primarily asphalt in order to provide students with the opportunities for play they deserve. The Winter Hill Community Innovation School was the first schoolyard selected for improvement. Thanks to financial support from the Board of Aldermen and the Community Preservation Act, the project's first phase was completed in August 2017 and the second phase is currently under construction. With improvements at the Winter Hill School underway, only three schoolyards remain that have not seen a major improvement in the last five years: the Brown, Healey and, and West Somerville Neighborhood Schools. These schools are now priorities for improvement based on the City's criteria for selecting open space improvement projects.

In 2017 the Mayor's Office of Strategic Planning & Community Development (OSPCD) worked with SomerStat to develop criteria for evaluating open space and schoolyard project opportunities to promote coordination and consistency with the 2016-2023 Open Space & Recreation Plan. The project criteria are summarized as follows:

1. What are the existing conditions of the facility and the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood?

2. What potential does the space have to address our highest priorities for open space, such as adding new open space or expanding athletic field capacity?
3. Is the open space a schoolyard? Because schoolyards see such intensive use from our youngest residents during the school day and from students and their families as well as other neighbors during evenings and weekends, they receive priority when the City considers which projects to take on next.

Current CPA Process

With the addition of Community Preservation Act (CPA) funding to the City's open space project financing toolbox, the City now has greater flexibility in addressing renovation needs for Somerville's open spaces, including schoolyards. The CPA process has also encouraged our residents to advocate for specific open space projects. We are pleased to report that two local school communities have become engaged in improving their schoolyards through the CPA.

In 2015 the Friends of the Healey applied for CPA funding to develop a master plan for connecting the Healey School with the Mystic housing community, and the Blessing of the Bay Boathouse and Park. In 2017, the Parks and Open Space Division applied for and received CPA funding for design services for the Healey schoolyard. This design process will use the master plan developed through the Friends of the Healey project as a key input.

Beginning with the FY17 application process, the Community Preservation Committee began requiring that community groups applying for funds for projects on public land collaborate with the relevant department as co-applicants. This ensures a strong partnership between the City and the proponent and provides support to the proponent with the requirements that come with implementing a project on public land. This process was formalized for the current FY18 application process. Community groups now submit a pre-application to the CPA Manager which is reviewed by the relevant City department in advance of the first application deadline. This process helps connect community groups with the relevant City department to develop their applications as collaborators from the beginning and ensures projects are in alignment with City priorities, community-wide values, and staff availability. Community groups proposing projects at public schools are requested to first discuss their ideas with the school's principal and the School Department's Finance Director to ensure the proposal is consistent with the priorities of the Somerville Public Schools.

2017-2018 Outlook

The Community Preservation Committee has now begun the FY18 CPA application process. The West Somerville Neighborhood School PTA and the School Improvement Council submitted a pre-application for CPA funding for design services for their schoolyard. OSPCD's Parks and Open Space Division and School Department assessed the pre-application against the previously mentioned criteria and agreed that improving the West Somerville Neighborhood School schoolyard is a high priority. Staff also recognized the great need for improvements at the Brown School. As a result, the City, along with the School Department, is applying for CPA funds for schoolyard design services at both the West Somerville Neighborhood School and the Brown School.

The City's community-based strategic plans, including the SomerVision Comprehensive Plan and the 2016-2023 Open Space & Recreation Plan establish ambitious goals for the City's open space resources. With limited capital funding and limited staff resources, transparent and data-drive project prioritization is crucial to ensure all Somerville residents have equitable access to high-quality open space and recreation facilities. We look forward to continued collaboration with the Board of Aldermen to ensure that Somerville's schoolyard facilities are renovated in a clear, expeditious, and cost-effective fashion.