



City of Somerville, Massachusetts

City Council School Building Facilities and Maintenance Special Committee

Meeting Minutes

Monday, March 25, 2024

6:00 PM

This meeting was held via Zoom, was called to order by Chair Davis at 6:03 pm and adjourned at 8:48 pm with a roll call vote of three in favor (Councilors Sait, Clingan, Davis), none opposed, and none absent.

Others present:

School Committee Members:

Leiran Biton, Chair of School Committee
Sarah Phillips
Luara Pitone

City Staff:

Matthew Bennett, Superintendent of Buildings
Rubén Carmona, Superintendent of Somerville Public Schools
Natasha Frazier, Assistant Clerk of Committees
Kimberley Hutter, Intergovernmental Affairs
Erik Larson, Energy Manager, Office of Sustainability and Environment, City of Somerville
Chad Mazza, Assistant Superintendent of Operations, Somerville Public Schools
Richard Raiche, Director of Infrastructure and Asset Management, City of Somerville
Melissa Woods, Director of Capital Projects

Roll Call

Present: Ward Six City Councilor Lance L. Davis, Ward Four City Councilor Jesse Clingan and Ward Five City Councilor Naima Sait

1. Committee Minutes (ID # [23-1785](#)) Approval of the Minutes of the School Building Facilities and Maintenance Special Committee Meeting of November 29, 2023.

RESULT: ACCEPTED
AYE: Ward Six City Councilor Davis, Ward Four City Councilor Clingan and Ward Five City Councilor Sait

2. Resolution (ID # [24-0087](#)) By Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Clingan That the Administration discuss with this Council's Special Committee on School Building Facilities and Maintenance, whether the financial comparisons of various new school building scenarios have taken into consideration projected costs of creating new usages at the current Winter Hill and Brown School sites.

Director Raiche stated that the financial comparisons of various new school building scenarios have not yet taken into consideration the projected costs of creating new usages at the current Winter Hill and Brown School sites. However, they have every intention of doing the work of taking these into consideration in the financial comparisons in the future. Chair Davis inquired about the projected timeline for doing this work. Director Raiche estimates they are 6 months out from doing this work, as they have a number of Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) items they are working on. The bulk of their efforts are going towards MSBA items at the moment. Ms. Phillips asked whether the advisory committee will have the updated financial estimates when making a recommendation to the Mayor's office about constructing the school buildings. Director Raiche confirmed that the advisory group will have the updated numbers, and stated that his office is looking to align the advisory group efforts with milestones in the MSBA process. Additionally, he stated that his office is doing work in a progression to align efforts to milestones within the MSBA process. Chair Biton asked for additional context regarding the 6 month timeline estimate, and Director Raiche stated that he estimates a 6-month timeline for updated financial estimates for several reasons. First, this time is required to finish up the scoping of the feasibility study to allow MSBA to concur with the study, after which homework would begin on other pieces, namely, understanding what the disposition of other buildings might be. Thus, late 2024 is when Director Raiche anticipates community conversations could then begin regarding what to do with leftover buildings. This would also give the City team (Economic Development, OSPCD, the Mayor's Office, and the Finance Department) time to pull together estimates of the cost to the City, or what the City could get from the return of the sale in an unlikely event they sell the property. Chair Biton highlighted that a desire for a ballpark number remains among the community. Chair Davis and Chair Biton discussed their desire for this item to remain in committee as a standing item to ensure regular updates, and Director Raiche agreed with this.

Chair Davis moved to make this item a standing item in Committee as follows: That the Administration provide this Joint Committee with regular updates about the MSBA process for the Winter Hill and Brown School. **The motion was approved on a roll call vote of 3 in favor (Councilors Sait, Clingan, Davis), none against, and none absent.**

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

3. Order
(ID # [24-0117](#))

By Councilor Strezio

That the Commissioner of Public Works and the Director of Infrastructure and Asset Management report on leaks at the Benjamin Brown School and any exterior envelope damages in the past six months, and actions being taken to address such leaks and damages including the recently dislodged downspout.

Superintendent Bennett stated that there are ongoing problems with leaks here and there like with any New England building. He stated that the roofing company has been on the Brown roof two times in the past 3 months or so, and that the downspout problem was a result of weather and was repaired. Regarding the Winter Hill building, Superintendent Bennett stated that nothing new or out of the

ordinary was done as far as roof leaks go. Superintendent Mazza stated that they are in constant conversation with Superintendent Bennett and the Supervisor of Buildings, Michael Bowler, to address any needs that arise at the Brown school. Superintendent Mazza stated that DPW has been very active and responsive whenever there is an issue at the Brown school and other schools. Councilor Wilson spoke as a member of the public, and asked if there are any current leaks other than what has already been repaired. Superintendent Bennett stated that there are no new leaks. He also stated that when it comes to patched areas, the leak will find the lowest possible point to come through. This means that leaks and patching are ongoing maintenance issues unless a roof is replaced completely.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

4. Order
(ID # [24-0338](#))

By Councilor Sait, Councilor Burnley Jr., Councilor Wilson, Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Strezo

That the Director of Infrastructure and Asset Management and the Director of the Office of Sustainability and Environment update this Council on plans to decarbonize current school buildings and any future school buildings.

Councilor Sait stated that at the end of last year, Councilor Gomez Mouakad put in an order regarding school building decarbonization as part of this Joint Committee and that there has been discussion regarding the importance of undertaking a full master plan for decarbonizing schools. Councilor Sait stated that the City of Somerville plans to build at least one school. Councilor Sait also stated that the Mayor's Somerville Climate Forward Plan identifies buildings as the highest contributors to global gas emissions, and that in order to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, it is important that the City start putting a plan together to do that. Councilor Sait asked the Administration if there are any updates on this work.

Manager Larson, Energy Manager at the Office of Sustainability and Environment, stated that Somerville is updating its Climate Action Plan and that it will be released at an upcoming launch event and that details are forthcoming for that event. Manager Larson stated that the City is committed to leading on climate and leading by example. According to Manager Larson, the Plan will have interim targets, goals, and strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in local government operations, including City and school buildings. The goal is to reduce GHG emissions in municipal operations completely by 2050. They are currently finalizing interim targets for 2030 and 2040. Draft language for these goals were open for public comment from Fall of 2023 through January 2024. Manager Larson further stated that the Office of Sustainability and Environment is leading interdepartmental efforts to coordinate with Somerville Public Schools administrative staff.

Councilor Sait sponsored speaker Sara Ross, co-founder of a national non-profit called Undaunted K12. The nonprofit is based in Massachusetts, but they help schools nationwide transition to zero-carbon emissions. She will share in her presentation how school construction projects can take advantage of unlimited, non-competitive federal funding for clean energy initiatives through the Inflation Reduction Act, as well as the MSBA's program for heat pump retrofitting.

Sara Ross described Undaunted K12 as a national non-profit that helps schools transition rapidly and equitably to zero-carbon. She stated that healthy buildings make healthy students, and that school buildings are part of equity and justice work. Ms. Ross stated that State and Federal apparatuses can help school buildings do this work. Ms. Ross gave a presentation regarding federal funding opportunities available through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and stated that schools are eligible recipients of a key part of this policy passed in 2022. She stated that there are clean energy tax credits available for schools under the IRA. Ms. Ross stated that clean energy tax credits are non-competitive, can be provided to schools as cash reimbursement, that the tax credits are available until 2032, and that there is no funding cap. She also stated that the heat pump retrofit program under the MSBA will begin in January 2025 and will continue to be available past 2032. There are additional opportunities at the state level provided in Ms. Ross' presentation. The bulk of Ms. Ross' presentation focused on the opportunities for schools under the IRA. Ms. Ross described how the IRA can provide funding for schools for heat pumps - especially ground source heat pumps - electric vehicles, solar energy, energy storage, and electric vehicle charging. These are the five most common uses found in schools, but funding is not limited to these five categories. The full presentation will be made available to the public.

Chair Sait asked Ms. Ross if there are any of the IRA tax credits that offset the cost of making the building envelope airtight and high performance, allowing for small electric, efficient heating and cooling like geothermal, for more operating savings for both new schools and renovation of existing buildings. Ms. Ross stated that there is a tax deduction that is claimed by the designer of the building for buildings that meet certain levels of energy efficiency. This gets claimed by the building designer - the deduction does not go to the school or city. There might be a possibility for pre-negotiating with designers to share savings. Ms. Ross suggested looking at additional incentives available through Mass Save.

Councilor Clingan asked if the City has done assessments of our current school buildings and whether the City has energy efficiency goals for its school buildings. Director Raiche stated that for new buildings, the City will not settle for anything less than the highest environmental standards. Regarding retrofitting older buildings, Director Raiche stated that they are being methodically investigated and conceptual designs are being explored. At present, the City is gathering data and identifying needs, working with the Finance Department for budgeting, and working with Manager Larson on identifying funding opportunities.

Manager Larson stated that there is a staff member focused on IRA and federal grant funding in the Office of Sustainability and Environment, so that the City can take advantage of available federal funding. Councilor Clingan stated that we owe it to the kids and stated that he is aware of parents mobilizing around these issues. Councilor Clingan suggested identifying community goals and setting benchmarks to meet those community goals, such as one year in the future, to ensure schools meet the goals at that time.

Councilor Sait asked Ms. Ross about the 45L tax credit. Ms. Ross later confirmed that the 45L tax credit is for homes and not for schools, adding that the IRS sees the world in two buckets - businesses and individuals, and that the structure of the tax credits reflects that. Additionally, Ms. Ross shared two links via chat:

First, Arlington's RFP for an Electrification and Air Quality Master Plan for 6 of their existing buildings:

<https://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/57164/637612416674070000>

Second, the resulting report:

<https://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/65935/638233929669870000>

Dr. Phillips of the School Committee asked if Ms. Ross' presentation materials regarding tax credits and incentives were already on the Administration's radar, and if so, what is the Administration doing to ensure the City takes advantage of these opportunities as quickly as possible. Manager Larson stated that the Office of Sustainability and Environment was previously aware of the information in the presentation and is taking every opportunity to take advantage of federal and state funds. He also stated that the City plans to expand its charging network in the City and for municipal buildings and is exploring all available funding for this.

Chair Biton asked Ms. Ross if higher upfront costs of technologies poses a special problem for installing these technologies. Additionally, Chair Biton expressed support for carbon neutral and carbon negative investments. Director Raiche stated that they prioritize long term investments over upfront costs and doing the right thing in the long term rather than letting upfront costs dissuade them from investments, but everything is considered on a case by case basis. Chair Davis directed a question to Director Raiche and/or Manager Larson regarding the data gathering and systems work previously mentioned by Director Raiche. Chair Davis asked if the Somerville Public Schools Mechanical Systems Master Plan is what Director Raiche was referring to. Director Raiche confirmed this is what being discussed.

Chair Sait asked if there is an energy sustainability project manager at the City or plans for a position of this nature. Director Raiche stated there is not one position designated for this work, but rather, a team dedicated to doing this work, which includes Manager Larson at the Office of Sustainability and Environment, and the Deputy Director of Capital Projects leads a team of three handling technical evaluation and planning as well as construction management.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

5. Resolution
(ID # [24-0341](#))

By Councilor Wilson, Councilor Clingan, Councilor Ewen-Campen and Councilor Burnley Jr.

That the Administration and the Director of Capital Projects, in conjunction with the Somerville Public Schools, update this Council on the scope and costs involved to renovate the basement of the Edgerly School to reunite the Winter Hill Community Innovation School community under one roof, the relevant state and federal laws triggering required compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the decision-making process around the timeline for proceeding with this work.

Director Raiche provided context about the memos sent out to families in recent weeks. Director Raiche stated there was a pause with an alert sent out

to parents expressing the possibility of not being able to fulfill the goal. There is a state law in Massachusetts chapter 521, Code of Massachusetts regulations. He stated this is the enabling legislation for the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board which is the body that administers both the Federal ADA Americans with Disabilities Act and the Massachusetts supplemental laws on ADA, so Massachusetts is a delegated State. Those regulations state that improvements to any building in which the total dollar value exceeds 30% of a building's assessed value, then the building needs to be made fully ADA compliant. The Edgerly is ADA compliant, but some aspects of it do not meet the full letter of the law under the 30% trigger. The City previously thought the assessed value would be high enough to not necessitate the 30% trigger. The reassessment was roughly \$16 million total. 30% of that is \$4.7 million dollars, and they had already spent about \$2.3 million, leaving a budget of \$2.4 million dollars before upgrades. They were also considering this from the perspective of timeline -there would only have been 10 weeks over the summer for upgrades - as well as the physical footprint. Ultimately, the answer was this work was not feasible unless the building was closed for many months or more than a year. According to Director Raiche, at this point, Capital Projects and Winter Hill administration began to look creatively to bring students into the building. They were successful in this and a communication went out to parents on Friday, also included in the March 25th memo. This plan entailed extensive expert consultation and coordination over the past 2 weeks, which is why this memo did not go out sooner.

Councilor Clingan expressed gratitude for being able to get students under one building. He stated that he has seen exceptions for private developers for non-ADA compliant buildings and wish the work could have been spread out over multiple summers. Councilor Clingan expressed concerns that in addition to the initial concern of everyone being under one roof, another issue is the roof is leaky. Director Raiche stated that some of the leaking in the building is not from the roof but is from the walls as well, and additional repairs are being pursued. Councilor Clingan asked Director Raiche to elaborate on soundproofing issues being explored and what "exploring" means. Director Raiche stated that they are still working through how to incorporate a resolution into a contract. They are pushing for positive resolution and do not have the details sorted out yet but he is cautiously optimistic as they work through contracting details. Director Raiche reaffirmed their complete determination to get this done. Councilor Clingan asked about identifying outdoors space and if new space in or around the building has been identified. Director Raiche stated he is less optimistic about this and understands it is a priority. They will continue advocacy but cannot promise a positive resolution on this. Councilor Clingan also expressed a priority of more interactive equipment for teachers, and that he is hoping for all of this to be done by the start of school next year.

Councilor Sait stated that she has heard from teachers about soundproofing issues. She said it is difficult for teachers to teach and for students to hear, and that resolving this should be a top priority, along with roof leaking. Councilor Sait asked if there are plans for rodent mitigation, and described conditions of mice all

over the school. She also asked how many parents changed their enrollment choice, and whether families will be given the option to switch back to schools in light of new information. Director Raiche referred to his previous answer regarding the roof and soundproofing issues. Regarding rats, he said he must defer to DPW, and must defer to Superintendent Carmona regarding enrollment issues. Councilor Clingan stated that every school has rodent problems and an aggressive approach is needed.

Superintendent Bennet stated that if food is left out in rooms, especially during winter months, rodents will find a way in. Councilor Sait asked about what the pest management company is doing in this specific school, and that as a teacher for 10 years, food reduction is challenging when working with hundreds of students and no composting. Councilor Sait asked what the plan is for September, particularly in light of the removal of rodenticide in the City of Somerville. Superintendent Bennett stated that DPW can do snap traps and sticky traps throughout building, or non-lethal pesticide in which there is bait in bait boxes. He said it appears the direction the City is headed in is smart traps, which are electrocution boxes and they are a large ticket number - around \$400,000. The goal is to work towards adding smart traps. Councilor Sait asked if DPW has enough staff to do the work of rodent mitigation and Superintendent Bennet stated he is not the right person to ask - that would be the Commissioner or Mayor. Superintendent Carmona underscored Councilor Sait's questions, and DPW's responsive efforts. He also emphasized the importance of the question of what is the most effective approach. He mentioned a teacher whose breast pump and clothes were chewed up by rodents. Superintendent Carmona said zero families actually switched their school choices, although there were a few inquiries about switching.

Laura Pitone expressed her excitement for the solution uniting Winter Hill and emphasized concerns about soundproofing and outdoor space. She stated that these families will be at the school for 5-7 years, and asked what the barriers are to dealing with soundproofing and upgrading to the outdoor space. She asked if the outdoor space is included in the 30% compliance threshold previously mentioned by Director Raiche. She asked if the outdoor space delays are due to time or money. She emphasized that Winter Hill serves some of the most vulnerable students, including students with sensory challenges. She would prioritize soundproofing over the outdoor space but hopes to see both invested in. She wants to understand the constraints. Director Woods addressed Laura Pitone's question about whether site improvements affect ADA thresholds. Director Woods stated it depends on whether they require a building permit. She said it is safe to say they won't require a building permit but that it always depends on final design.

Director Raiche stated time is the main issue as opposed to money. Time is required to install the outdoor space. Certain types of surfaces are necessary for the outdoor space. He stated that the barriers to the outdoor space is logistics, not financial, but rather: operations, logistics, and timelines. He stated that soundproofing is the mechanism for procurement. He is cautiously optimistic they will be able to solve this issue. It will be a non-issue. They have not figured it out yet, but they will. Sarah Phillips stated that a lot of conflict could have been avoided through better messaging around principles. She emphasized the importance of communicating district deadlines to families in a way that promotes trust.

Director Raiche stated that the focus has been on problem solving, and that communication occurred at the last possible minute once answers were found. He will have conversations with people in the communication departments. Superintendent Carmona echoed Director Raiche's comment and stated that it is not their intent to make messages more complicated, and that the Winter Hill community has been the recipient of challenges that keep piling up. He stated their intent is not to miscommunicate; their intent is to serve the community the best they can.

Chair Biton said everyone makes mistakes and it is best to own up to them and not to make the same mistakes again. He then asked what the initial valuation was proceeding the project. He asked if it was \$16 million dollars. Director Raiche stated that the assumption they were operating under last year was the building would appraise north of \$30 million, then they started seeing some other valuations in the area for other projects and realized \$30 million was very off base and there had been a radical market adjustment. Councilor Sait asked if families will be contacted with latest update in case they want to switch back. Superintendent Carmona stated that zero families switched in the first place so no families need to switch back.

There was substantial discussion led by City Councilors regarding how to ensure that materials attached to the agenda are easily accessible to the public and members of the Joint Committee, as well as ensuring that communication relevant to the Committee that is shared with parents also gets communicated to the Joint Committee. Intergovernmental Affairs and the City Clerk's office will coordinate regarding meeting attachments, while Superintendent Carmona will check to see how information gets to the City Council, and either Chair Davis or Councilor Sait will prepare a motion regarding improving communication.

Finally, Chair Davis asked Director Raiche the extent to which renovation work in the basement of the Edgerley will add longterm value to district. Director Raiche stated that the Edgerley building in general is a valuable asset in the City's building portfolio. He said the bones of the building are very good and it is the long term goal to operate that building for various uses after Winter Hill has moved out and into its new home. Investments into the Edgerley building are a good City investment. This summer, electric system will be updated to bring air conditioning into the gym and cafeteria. The City wants to hold onto this building for a long time. However, the boxing club can't be updated in a meaningful way because of what it triggers and the 10-week timeline.

Chair Davis asked if the City is planning to hire a code consultant for this project. DR: The consultant is on the team of architects, but because interpretation of codes can sometimes be an issue, some gray area items are shared with inspectional services to ensure they concur with design decisions for the certificate of occupancy. Councilor Sait asked if the Edgerley was valued as an office or a school. Director Raiche stated that it was zoned as civic, use as school. It previously was used as offices and partially a school.

RESULT: RECOMMENDED TO BE MARKED WORK COMPLETED

Referenced Documents:

- SBFM - 2024-03-25 WHaE Ph2 Update 2024Mar25 r2 (with 24-0341)
- SBFM - 2024-03-25 Sara Ross Somerville Presentation (with 24-0338)