

# **Frequently Asked Questions—Proposed ORCSD Middle School**

**Developed in consultation with the ORCSD administration, School Board representatives, and the middle school architectural team. It also reflects conclusions of previous studies of the middle school building.**

## **Why are we proposing to build a new middle school?**

The current building, in true New England fashion, is a set of additions. The oldest section was built in 1935, with major additions in 1954, 1979, and most recently 1996. The building has evolved to the point that it is a sprawling structure with 1500 feet of corridor and 60,000 square feet of roof—the equivalent of three football fields. Connecting the various additions has led to ramps, lifts, and half-floors that make navigation difficult for anyone with mobility issues. The sheer footprint of the building limits the way the 11+ acre site plot can be used.

Numerous studies have shown that the current building has other serious deficiencies that are not correctable.

- There are severe problems with heat, noise, student safety (the terrible traffic pattern, multiple entrances), and handicap accessibility.
- Many of the classrooms were designed for an elementary school and are undersized for a middle school—especially for art and science.
- There is inadequate storage and performance space for the growing music program.
- There is inadequate space for special education work and for foreign language instruction.
- Classrooms are not located to facilitate the team concept that is central to middle school education.
- The current building lacks the break-out spaces and small conference rooms that are needed for today's education.
- Many of the operational systems are at or near the end of their functional life. Simply to stay in the current building could cost \$10-12 million in the near term.
- It is an opportune time to build. The first major bond payments will coincide with the final payments of the high school bond—and we can take advantage of record low interest rates, probably below 3%.

## **Hasn't the District already approved the new middle school?**

No. The district approved \$800,000 to pay for the architects and construction manager to develop a complete plan for the new building. This work will give us a fixed cost for the building—and allow construction to begin immediately after the bond is passed. In effect, you can't vote on a plan until you have a plan.

### **How much will the school cost, and what effect will it have on tax rates?**

We estimate that the school will cost \$49 million to be paid with 25-year bonds. We anticipate that we will be able to handle bond payments by increasing our budget by about 3.5% over the next few years. In other words, the increases will be similar to recent budgets that have been overwhelmingly approved.

A caution—it is impossible for the Board to predict actual taxes in the three towns because a variety of factors go into the rate—health insurance costs, apportioned property, student attendance, aid from the state, and the town budgets. Each year the impact of the budget differs from town to town. But we predict that the ASK of future budgets will be about a 3.5 % annual increase, about what it has been in past years.

### **Does that mean there will be no sharp spike when the bond payment comes due?**

Yes. We anticipate no spike—for two reasons. One, the major bond payment will come due when we are retiring the bond for the high school (about \$750,000). That money can go to the new bond.

And secondly, we will build into the budget an extra 1% each year over the next four years, devoted to the bond—so that by steadily increasing our annual budget by 3.5 % (2.5% for regular expenses, 1% in anticipation of the bond payment) we be can accommodate bond payments when the full weight becomes due.

### **How does the per/square foot cost of the building compare to similar building projects?**

The proposed middle school is currently tracking around \$346 per sq. ft. Here are cost comparisons to 2 new schools we've been tracking:

New Camden Middle School, in Camden ME is 84,000 sq. ft and the Total Project Cost is just over \$371 per sq. ft. Construction started in the Summer of 2018 and is scheduled to be completed in Sept 2020.

New Amesbury Elementary School, in Amesbury MA. The Total Project Cost is just over \$550 per sq. ft. Construction will start this coming Fall 2020 or Spring 2021.

It should be noted that neither of these projects have the considerable up-front costs of geo-thermal energy.

### **Why did we locate the building on the current middle school site?**

The existing site was chosen to provide the community with the following:

- Lower development cost, avoiding costs to acquire land, construct utilities, and a year's worth of site exploration and permitting, with a savings of approximately \$2.9 million dollars.
- A new middle school that remains in the Durham downtown, close to UNH, the Durham Public Library (which is open to children from all three towns), and other amenities—but with a re-designed traffic flow that will minimize traffic jams at the beginning and end of the school day.
- A new middle school that remains close to the high school so students from both schools can continue to take advantage of sharing resources and facilities.

The Board determined that building a new school that is miles away from the high school would make for longer and more complex (and expensive) bus routes. The only possible off-site properties were on the other side of Rt. 4 and would have meant there could be no walkers or bike traffic.

### **Did the district consider other options?**

Yes. The Middle School Facilities Committee investigated over a dozen options. These included expanding the elementary schools and shifting middle school students to them. It included expanding the high school to include middle school students. It included repurposing the high school as a middle school and building a new high school. The committee also considered renovating the current building—and it also considered not making any changes and continuing with the current building. It found significant cost or logistical problems with all these options.

### **Why not renovate?**

On the surface it might seem that renovation would be more economical than building new, but on investigation we found that it was actually more expensive. For example, the Portsmouth Middle School renovation was very expensive. Renovation would lock the rebuilding onto the current inefficient footprint, and it would create a huge headache during renovation—where will students go?

### **What happens if we do nothing?**

Actually, doing nothing is quite costly. All of the existing systems within the existing school are near the end of their useful life. Simply to stay in the building will require upgrades to lighting, windows, HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, Air-conditioning), as well as possibly a new roof in the near future. If we would install air-conditioning, that would cost approximately \$1 million (plus the additional energy). These upgrades could cost as much as \$10-12 million, and still not deal with the major deficiencies of the building.

The Board feels that doing nothing is simply passing on a problem to future boards, kicking the can down the road.

### **How will proposed school enhance education in the district?**

- The new building will enhance the team concept by clustering classrooms for the core subjects on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floor. To minimize the noise the distraction of moving between classes, there will be four separate stairways going up to team spaces.
- The classrooms will meet or exceed current guidelines, with the art and science spaces larger than normal classrooms.
- The building will have the advantage of a geothermal system for regulating temperature, and will avoid the extremes of hot and cold, experienced in the current building.
- There will be a set of classrooms for foreign language on the second floor.
- The athletic program will benefit from a high school size gym and a regulation turf soccer field.
- The music program will have adequate practice and storage spaces—and a state-of-the-art recital hall.
- The building will have numerous smaller break-out rooms that can be used for smaller groups.
- The building will be filled with natural light—creating appealing spaces for work and socializing.

In sum, the current building works against the educational mission of the school. The new building will support it.

### **Why have we not retained parts (e.g. the original high school building) of the current school in the plan?**

Cost and space. Retaining or repurposing the original high school building would be very expensive, since it would have to be brought up to current standards. Even turning the middle school gym into a free-standing structure would be costly—and not be of particular use to the district since the plan for the middle school includes a high-school size gym.

Retaining these structures would also eat into the space that we will need for athletic fields, parking, and roadways. The total land plot is already small for a middle school, under 12 acres. The Board felt it could not retain these parts of the current middle school and still have space for key features of the new plan.

### **How does the proposed building make use of sustainable—non-carbon—energy?**

The proposed building is designed for sustainability in the following ways:

- Geothermal systems to reduce the use of fossil fuels and provide operationally “free” air-conditioning through using the earth as heat sink, rather than electric compressors.

- Daylight harvesting will be available, with proper building orientation and strategic use of glass, to reduce the need for electric lighting.
- Solar Hot Water systems will reduce energy use in domestic water demands.
- Exterior wall, foundation, and roof systems will be designed to provide enhanced insulation to reduce the heating and cooling loads; which in turn, reduce operational costs.

In terms of energy efficiency, and sustainability, we anticipate the proposed school will surpass all New Hampshire public schools.

### **Will the proposed school be air-conditioned?**

A geothermal system will allow the earth to provide heating and cooling options throughout the building. This system will avoid the extremes of temperature that plague the current building.

### **In what ways will this building ensure maximum safety for students and staff?**

There are numerous features that enhance safety:

- There will be one main entrance that can be carefully monitored at the front of the building.
- Most instruction will be on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floor with numerous lock-points that can be activated in an emergency. There will also be safe egress from the building through four stairways.
- The traffic patterns will be changed so that students are not constantly walking through traffic. (The number one cause of student fatalities on school grounds is an auto accident.) There will be separate entrance ways for cars and buses.
- We will move to single-user toilets, avoiding “gang toilets” which can be a place for intimidation and bullying.

### **Why does the new school have a recital hall?**

A 900-seat recital hall will be a district-wide facility. It will be a state-of-art, acoustically designed performance space that can accommodate the audience that currently attempts to attend student performances but cannot fit within the existing high school or middle school spaces. It will be large enough to fit all 700 middle school students, plus faculty, SAU leaders, community leaders, and guests for assembly purposes. We believe it will enhance the music programs throughout the district.

### **What size student body will the school be built for?**

The building can accommodate 700 students, which is about 40 more than the current enrollment. Our current long-term planning projects call for a flat or slightly declining middle school population. In the event that this population goes well above projections, the building

could be expanded to over 800 students by adding classrooms on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floor. That contingency is built into the design.

**What if the bond doesn't pass?**

It is undetermined if the Board will re-introduce it. If it does, we anticipate that building inflation will increase the cost of the project by 4%. To propose the same building, we would either have to ask for \$2 million more, or scale back the building. Delays in the high school expansion dramatically increased costs. We also might not be able to benefit from the historically low interest rates that are currently available.

**What vote will be required to pass the bond?**

We will need 60% approval of voters. As a point of comparison, the Athletic Fields warrant passed with 1,786 or 68%. Assuming a higher turnout for such a significant vote, we anticipate a need for 2,000 yes votes.

**When in the vote?**

March 10 at local polling places.

**Who do I contact if I want to work for passage of the bond?**

thomasnewkirk1948@gmail.com