

DOES TOWN GOVERNMENT HAVE AN EDIFICE COMPLEX?

In September, the Scarborough Town Council rubber-stamped the school board's **budget-busting** proposal for a new unified elementary school to replace the Town's 3 existing neighborhood schools—**without taking into account meaningful public input or doing any “value engineering” to reduce costs.** It now wants you to do the same.

A poor process has produced a predictably poor result.

The proposed project cost of \$160 million is really \$277 million, with interest—**THAT’S RIGHT, MORE THAN A QUARTER BILLION DOLLARS!** That’s more than \$50,000 for a family of 4, based on Scarborough's 2020 population.

This would be the **most expensive school ever built in Maine.** Here’s how the project would stack up against the current holder of this dubious record:

PROJECT	APPROX. COST	SQUARE FOOTAGE	COST PER SQ. FT.	STUDENT CAPACITY	COST PER STUDENT	FUNDING SOURCE
Edward Little High School, Auburn	\$126 million (recently completed)	280,000	\$450	1200	\$105,000	State Taxpayers
Scarborough Unified Elementary School	\$160 million (proposed)	193,572	\$827	1130	\$141,593	Town Taxpayers

The Scarborough project, a smaller building than Edward Little, nonetheless would cost roughly 27% more—**83% more per square foot** and nearly 35% more per student at capacity—and, **unlike for Edward Little, there isn’t going to be any state funding to reduce the burden on Town taxpayers.**

Here are a few more facts relevant to this bloated proposal:

- Scarborough's most expensive project to date is the Wentworth Intermediate School, at **\$34 million**
- Scarborough K-2 **enrollment is down** since 2010, but **the proposed school is more than twice the size of all 3 current primary schools COMBINED**
- The proposed school is more than **14,000 square feet larger than the average Walmart Supercenter**

The school also would cost more, both in total and per square foot, than any of these other major new area buildings:

PROJECT	APPROX. COST	SQUARE FOOTAGE	COST PER SQ. FT.
383 Commercial Street, Portland (luxury condominiums)	\$44 million	160,000	\$275
201 Federal Street, Portland (Maine’s tallest building)	\$64 million	180,000	\$356
Portland Commons (USM dorm and garage)	\$97.5 million	210,000	\$464

Plus, Town taxpayers are being asked to pay Crossroads Holdings LLC (The Downs) **more than 40% more per acre for the school site** than Issaquah, WA-based Costco paid for the land for its new store at The Downs:

BUYER	DATE	PURCHASE PRICE	ACREAGE	PRICE PER ACRE
Costco Wholesale Corporation	12/2022	\$4.5 million	19.25	\$233,756
Town of Scarborough	9/2023 (option agreement)	\$7.21 million (PLUS millions in additional Town-paid infrastructure and new development rights for The Downs)	21.87	\$329,675 + +

Why should Costco get a better deal than Town taxpayers?

The Town hasn't shown how all of this spending equates to better educational outcomes—as opposed to just self-serving measures of things like square footage per student—because it doesn't.

What’s more, the Town spins the numbers to paint a misleading picture of the proposed project's impacts on taxpayers (for example, using a hypothetical \$400,000 home—well below recent median sales prices—as the basis for its calculations). But even the Town’s own numbers are scary. Assuming a conservative estimate of 3% baseline annual growth in taxes to cover other Town spending, here's what the owners of \$400,000 and \$600,000 homes may be on the hook for as soon as 2026-2027:

ASSESSED HOME VALUE	CURRENT ANNUAL TAX (BASED ON 15.97 MILL RATE FOR 2023-24)	ASSUMED ANNUAL TAX INCREASE TO COVER REGULAR TOWN AND SCHOOL SPENDING	APPROX. ADD'L TAX IMPACT OF SCHOOL BOND (PER YEAR, FOR FIRST 3 YEARS)	APPROX. TOTAL CUMULATIVE ADD'L TAX IMPACT OF SCHOOL BOND EACH YEAR, AT PEAK	APPROX. TOTAL ANNUAL TAX IN 2026-27
\$400,000	\$6,388	3%/year	\$200/year	\$505-\$660	\$7,600
\$600,000	\$9,582	3%/year	\$300/year	\$750-\$1,000	\$11,400

These figures assume that the Town will maintain its recent rapid rates of population growth (e.g., 4.9% between April 1, 2020, and July 1, 2022), even beyond the build-out of the current Downs project. The Town is saying that **growth is required to pay for this project.** It's saying that growth will limit future tax increases, but—even if that's true (and long-time South Portlanders will tell you that they were sold the same bill of goods when the Maine Mall was built in the late 1960s)—roughly two-thirds of respondents to Scarborough's 2021 Community Survey said that the Town's rate of residential growth was “too fast” or “much too fast.” And what if the Town’s assumptions prove wrong (in the event of an inevitable recession, or if voters rebel against further growth)? In that case, **taxes may rise even higher, faster.**

So, **this project guarantees higher taxes,** mitigated only by growth that a supermajority of residents doesn't want. Maine already has some of the highest property taxes in America, not to mention a major new payroll tax that will be collected from Mainers’ paychecks beginning in 2025. Advocates like to say that new taxes are like buying an extra cup of coffee a day, but what they don't say about this proposal is that, by year 3, Town taxpayers would be buying 3 extra cups a day—which they may need to stay awake while working all of the hours they'll need to pay those taxes!

Advocates also like to say that projects like these are for the kids, and they suggest that you're not a nice person if you don't vote in favor. But who's not being nice here? Do nice people question the motives of those who disagree with them in good faith? **Do nice people ignore their constituents’ concerns about growth, and obfuscate and mislead their constituents about the economic impacts of their policy choices? Do nice people drive people on fixed incomes and working families out of their homes?** Do we really want our kids wandering around a big box-sized school building instead of the human-scale schools they attend now? What good does a big, expensive school do for kids if their parents can't afford to live in Scarborough anymore anyway?

Council Chair Jon Anderson writes in a recent op-ed that a vote for a quarter-billion dollar school is a vote for “our values”—but whose values are those? The values of taxpayers who overwhelmingly oppose more growth? Or the values of the Town’s ‘Municipal Industrial Complex’ that exists to spend ever more of taxpayers’ money and imply that folks are “evil” or “greedy” if they dare question it?

A “Yes” vote for the school bond is a vote to ratify a bad process, a vote for supercharged growth, and a vote for taxes that many of our neighbors won't be able to pay.

VOTE “NO” ON THE SCHOOL BOND!