

**Needham Finance Committee
Minutes of Meeting of March 17, 2021**

EXECUTIVE SESSION

The Executive Session of the Finance Committee was called to order by the Carol Fachetti at approximately 5:55 pm via Zoom Video Webinar after a unanimous roll call vote by the Committee during an open meeting to enter Executive Session under Exception 6. This was a combined meeting with the Select Board also convened in executive session.

Present from the Finance Committee:

Carol Fachetti, Chair ; Joshua Levy, Vice Chair

Members: Barry Coffman, John Connelly, James Healy, Richard Lunetta, Louise Miller, Richard Reilly

Others:

Kate Fitzpatrick, Town Manager

David Davison, Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director

Maurice Handel, Select Board

Matt Borrelli, Select Board

Dan Matthews, Select Board

Property Acquisition

Mr. Handel stated that the Select Board is seeking feedback on the proposed acquisition of property at 1177 Central Avenue, adjacent to the Newman School property. The Select Board is no longer considering using eminent domain to force a sale, and believes that the new owners are willing to negotiate in good faith. They have discussed paying \$1.5 million. The Historical Commission has indicated they will not put a demolition delay on the current house. Mr. Borrelli stated that the Select Board met with the School Committee who support the acquisition as a part of a Newman campus, but not for relocation of School Administration. He reiterated that the parcel was on a list of properties that the Town would be interested in if they became available. Mr. Matthews stated that owning the property would be good for the Town if the price is reasonable, but a consensus of Town leaders is important to move forward.

Mr. Connelly stated that he does not support the acquisition. He would want to hear from the School Committee directly that they want the property and would make good use of it. He does not see the strategic nature of this property, as it is not unique among properties abutting school land. There has been no analysis of the 60 acres at Newman and whether that space is inadequate for an unmet need, or a full vetting of uses of other school properties. \$1.5 million is not a fair price to the taxpayers. He is glad that they are not pursuing eminent domain. Ms. Miller agreed with Mr. Connelly and stated that she does not support the acquisition. She stated that the premium is problematic without an analysis of the value of the property and of the premium. She expressed concern about the impact of another traffic-heavy use on Central Avenue.

Mr. Handel noted that the Board is not intending to interfere with the School Committee's process for reconstructing Emery Grover (EG) and working with the CPC for funding support. That was only considered if fixing EG had been unaffordable. Mr. Borrelli stated that the School Committee was not supportive when they felt that they were being pushed to putting School

Administration on this site, but were generally supportive of the acquisition as part of Newman or for recreation.

Ms. Fachetti stated that she felt that the only intent for purchasing the property was to have an alternative to the EG project, but she is concerned about acquiring it for strategic purposes with no specific plans. The Town has many current capital needs. She is not in favor of the purchase unless it would be used expressly for a relocation of School Administration, and that is workable for the Schools at a lower cost to the Town. Mr. Borrelli stated that they are thinking of the very long term.

Mr. Lunetta stated the he supported the decision not to use eminent domain, and would be interested to hear more about how the Board defines this strategic acquisition. He has not supported the limitations of recent single-use buildings such as the senior center or recreation building, and would like to see a multi-purpose building at the EG site. Mr. Handel stated that the Town has limited land, and this could be a potential site for school use. It is also one parcel away from Cusick Field. Mr. Borrelli stated that Town has little “green” property ready for development. He noted that the premium is not high, since property values have been increasing. Mr. Matthes stated that the Newman property has restrictions due to wetlands.

Mr. Coffman stated that this property sold for \$1.027 million in February. The \$500K premium is not justified just to hold it for a potential school use. It might be justified if the Town were saving a few million by owning the property. Given the other needs in Town, the premium is not justified. Mr. Levy agreed. Without a specified use, the property is something “nice to have”, and lower priority than other needs.

Mr. Healy stated that if the Town is not negotiating the price of real property, then this Executive Session is not justified under state law as being detrimental to the Town’s position. He stated that the church abutting the Newman property would be a much preferred sit to acquire. Mr. Borrelli stated that the Town approached the current property owners about buying the property. The owners sent a letter through their attorney to the Town saying that they would discuss purchasing the property for \$1.5 million, so there is a potential negotiation, and the Town’s position would be harmed if they knew that amount was being considered. Mr. Connelly asked that the letter be provided. Mr. Healy stated that he feels the goal should be a financially feasible plan for addressing needs at Pollard and Mitchell Schools.

Mr. Reilly stated that he has not heard enough to justify the strategic value of the property if the School Committee wants to proceed with refurbishing Emery Grover rather than alternative sites. Ms. Fachetti asked where this fell as a priority on the list of desired properties. Mr. Handel stated that the list is not prioritized. He stated that the Board was not trying to sell the idea, but seeking feedback, and he felt he understood the Committee’s concerns.

The Select Board voted to adjourn.

Adjournment

MOVED: By Mr. Healy that the Finance Committee meeting be adjourned, there being no further business. Mr. Coffman seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a unanimous roll call vote of 8-0 at approximately 6:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Louise Mizgerd
Staff Analyst