

October 29, 2015

Dear Fellow Town Meeting Members:

In anticipation of your questions about the proposed acquisition of the Central Avenue site for a new Hillside elementary school, the School Committee wishes to share information we hope will provide relevant context and information.

Thank you for your support of the schools, and I look forward to seeing you next Monday, November 2<sup>nd</sup> at the Special Town Meeting.

Sincerely,

Connie Barr, Needham School Committee Chair

**Article 13: Appropriate for Property Acquisition  
Needham Special Town Meeting  
November 2, 2015**

**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about the Central Avenue Site Proposed for a New Hillside Elementary School**

**1. What is a Feasibility Study and why is it important?**

The Feasibility Study is the first step in the design process for a new school in partnership with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). The Feasibility Study includes three stages ending with the Schematic Design and Project Funding Agreement (PFA). The PFA becomes the basis for the override vote and the MSBA reimbursement for a school project.

**2. Where can I find out more information about the Hillside Feasibility Study?**

The School Department web site has a page with the most current information:

[http://rwd1.needham.k12.ma.us/Hillside\\_and\\_Mitchell\\_Planning/](http://rwd1.needham.k12.ma.us/Hillside_and_Mitchell_Planning/)

**3. What sites did the School Committee and Permanent Public Building Committee (PPBC) consider for a new or renovated Hillside Elementary School?**

As part of the Feasibility Study, the PPBC examined several options, including the present Hillside School campus, DeFazio field, the High Rock School campus, and the Central Avenue site.

**4. What is the preferred site for a new elementary school and why?**

After several meetings of the School Committee and Permanent Public Building Committee (PPBC), and after consultations with Town officials and Boards, the School Committee voted unanimously to select the Central Avenue site (Owens Poultry Farm and adjacent houses) as the preferred option for a new elementary school.

The School Committee selected this site for several reasons:

- The site is the only one that meets each of the priorities the School Committee identified for a new elementary school in 2012: a) Space for Full Day Kindergarten, b) Neighborhood-based school, c) Minimize additional transportation and operating costs; minimize non-reimbursable costs, including temporary classrooms, d) Minimize redistricting.
- The site provides ample, sufficient, and appropriate space for all of the educational and programmatic needs identified by the School Committee, school staff, and the MSBA.
- The Central Avenue site will allow the Town to preserve two potential future sites for School or Town use: The existing Hillside campus and DeFazio Field.
- The Central Avenue site is beautiful and safe and will be a wonderful venue for children to grow, learn, play, and achieve.

**5. What amount is being requested?**

The cost of the land purchase is \$6.5 million; the cost of demolition and site costs is \$500,000.

**6. Is the Central Avenue site big enough for a new school?**

Yes, the site has approximately five buildable acres, which provides sufficient space for a new elementary school. The school Committee and MSBA agreed to design and build a school for 430 students, regardless of

the site chosen. However, we are using the lowest possible number of students per classroom in the design to provide capacity for enrollments in excess of this amount. The school will actually be able to accommodate at least 544 students according to School Committee class size guidelines.

**7. What are some of the features planned in the school's design?**

The architects, school staff, PPBC, School Committee, and MSBA have been working on the Feasibility Study, which outlines the educational goals and classroom needs of a new school. The proposed school design has approximately 90,000 square feet of space (compared to 47,000 square feet at the existing Hillside School), including classrooms, gym, media center, cafeteria, and performance area that will support the academic program. Offices, special education classrooms, and meeting areas complement and support the design. Additionally, outdoor spaces, including an art presentation area and play areas, are proposed. School safety and security features, wireless technology, and modern HVAC systems are also included in the design. All of the classrooms are designed to be larger than existing Hillside classrooms, and all are proposed to meet MSBA guidelines to ensure sufficient student space, flexibility, and movement.

**8. Is the school being designed to be too small because of site space constraints?**

No. The Central Avenue site provides ample and beautiful space to build an elementary school that will allow for enrollment growth. Of course, any site, including DeFazio and the existing Hillside campus, present challenges to design and operations. The MSBA has agreed to participate in a Feasibility Study that supports a 430-student school *regardless of the site chosen*. However, as explained earlier, the school is being designed in such a way to support future growth. The Central Avenue site supports a school that will be almost twice the size of the existing Hillside Elementary School.

**9. Did you study a "Green field site" as a base case?**

Yes, Dore & Whittier Architects studied over 20 alternatives during the Preliminary Design Program (PDP) stage of the project. Details of each option and the analysis can be found in the PDP document posted on the School Department website, noted above. The DeFazio West site was considered by the PPBC to be the closest to a "green field" site that could be found within Needham. This site is under the jurisdiction of the School Department in the western corner of DeFazio Park and bounded by the MBTA tracks, Dedham Ave., and the running track. The estimated total cost to construct a new elementary school at this site is approximately \$60 million depending upon the orientation of the school.

**10. Is there a Traffic Report regarding the Central Avenue site?**

Yes, and the results were presented and discussed at the School Committee meeting on 10/6/15. The Traffic Report is posted on the School Department web site.

**11. Is Central Avenue too busy to add another school?**

According to the Traffic Report the site is not too busy to consider locating a school at the site. The consultant recommends several additional improvements, including:

- Designate the area as a School Zone under State and Local statute, and install the appropriate School Zone signs, which will also act as traffic calming devices.
- Improve pedestrian experience along Central Avenue, including improving the sidewalks on both sides of the roadway to accommodate safe walk to school; and providing advanced warning signing of school entering and exiting traffic.
- Install ADA accessible crosswalks.
- Reach out to parents and neighbors in multiple ways to increase safety awareness.

The potential need for a new traffic light at the intersection of West Street and Central Avenue or a flashing light at the new entry drive to the school requires further study, as they may not be warranted.

**12. Is there sufficient sight line distance at the new entrance drive?**

Yes, the sightlines at the new entry drive meet or exceed the policy standards (see Table 7 on page 28 of the Traffic Report).

**13. How will students safely cross Central Avenue to get to school?**

The improvements noted above will be installed as a part of the project. A traffic crossing guard would direct crossing at the beginning and the end of the day, similar to the Newman School (where about 80% of the students walking to school cross Central Avenue or Great Plain Avenue at the beginning or end of the school day). Students will cross at one location, with the assistance of a crossing guard to a sidewalk that leads to the

front door of the new school. The Eliot School also has many students who cross Central Avenue safely at the crosswalk near Cedar Street with the assistance of crossing guard.

**14. Will the traffic noise level affect learning in the school?**

No, background traffic noise will have minimal impact to the classroom and other interior spaces of the school. The School will be designed to meet contemporary energy codes. It will have double pane windows and heavily insulated exterior walls. This also acts to minimize the sound entering the school from the exterior. Fresh air will be circulated by the HVAC system, which will be a great improvement over the existing conditions, minimizing the need to open classroom windows, similar to all of the renovated Needham School buildings. The school's front door is planned to be located approximately 185 feet from the road; for comparison purposes, Broadmeadow's front door is about 200 feet from the road and Mitchell's is 160 feet from the road.

**15. Will the traffic along Central Avenue affect the air quality within the school?**

No, as noted above the new school will have an HVAC system that will filter, and dehumidify the fresh air supplied to the classrooms. It will also not require the under-slab depressurization system that is currently installed in the existing Hillside School.

**16. Parking at Hillside today is very limited; does this option have sufficient parking to serve the school?**

Yes. The current design shows 100 designated car parking spaces in the Central Avenue parking lot. This is twice the number of available parking spaces within the existing Hillside school lot. The minimum target parking capacity was 90 spaces; precedent zoning for elementary schools in town would seek a capacity of 118 spaces or 1.5 spaces per each full time staff member at the school. When there are major evening events the lot could accommodate another 25 or so cars parked parallel to the curb in the pickup lane. The bus loop also would serve as overflow parking for major events but will be accessed from the Central Avenue entrance to the site.

**17. How will the Central Avenue site accommodate pick-up and drop-off car traffic?**

The parking lot layout also allows for a pick-up and drop-off lane that will accommodate about 57 cars. In inclement weather conditions, with double loading of a portion of the pick-up lane, 80 cars could be accommodated on site. During the peak pickup period observed in the report only 47 cars were stacked up within the existing Hillside school lot, and the adjacent streets of Castle Place, McCullough St, and some cars backed up onto West Street. The Central Avenue site could be managed so cars do not back-up onto Central Avenue.

**18. Can school buses access the Central Avenue site down Sunset Road? Is the road big enough?**

Yes, the road is designed to meet town standards and is therefore wide enough to accommodate bus and emergency traffic. The new bus turning area on the southern end of the new school site will accommodate all the five Hillside parked buses during pick-up time. On street parking may need to be limited to one side of the street, or during key times of the day. The geometry is similar to the bus drop off area at the back of Broadmeadow School. A Needham school bus test drove the two roads and had no difficulty making the turns.

**19. Does the Central Avenue School design have enough outdoor play space?**

Yes. The play space is spread out around the proposed Central Avenue school campus with play structures and hardscape play areas located closest to the cafeteria for mid-day recess and playfields located closer to the gym. The play area meets the physical educational program and recess requirements for a K-5 school. The upper level hardscape play space will be designed to provide basketball, hopscotch, foursquare, chess and other hard surface play. The lower play space is accessed from the gymnasium level, and would include a kindergarten playground, hardscape play area and green field. While not large enough to accommodate a regulation soccer field or baseball diamond, the field would be about 25 yards x 50 yards plus additional play space around the school. The field is larger than U6 and U8 regulation soccer fields but slightly smaller than U10 youth soccer field size. The expansive conservation area to the west toward Wellesley, the woods on the north side of the property, and the long forgotten trail to the hill offer a scenic, picturesque, and attractive school setting—one that will allow students and staff to take advantage of the venue unhindered from the demands of a busy DeFazio athletic/DPW site and in a way that complements, supports, and enriches the educational program.

**20. Will the new school at Central Avenue be built above the flood plain?**

Yes, the Central Avenue school will be built approximately five feet above the flood plain at its lowest point.

**21. Will the Town of Needham be able to get flood insurance for the new school?**

Yes, but the town would not be required to purchase flood insurance because the new building would be constructed outside the FEMA flood plain. The designers are in the process of filing a Letter of Map Amendment (LOMA) so that the FEMA Zone A Line and the town Flood Plain Line will be coincident.

**22. Will a new school at this site cause flooding to the neighbors?**

No, any new construction will balance any filled land with an equal volume of cut area, so that it would not have any change regarding flooding within this zone.

**23. Will the Central Avenue site be a walkable school? How does it compare to the current Hillside school?**

Yes, the site will allow students to walk safely to school. The projection is that 25% of the students will be within the ¾ mile walking distance to the new Central Avenue School. The existing Hillside site has about 30% of the students within this walking zone. (About 20% of students could walk to DeFazio, although the existing sidewalk under the bridge on Dedham Avenue would require further consideration and study to determine its utility as an appropriate passage to school for elementary aged students.)

**24. Is the Central Avenue site affected by the MDL contamination found at the Hillside School?**

No, the reactive barrier that was installed by the state at the Central Avenue Rosemary Brook Bridge has been effective in stopping the contamination from reaching this area. The reactive barrier was installed to protect the Wellesley Water supply. Those fresh water wells and pump station are on the far side of the wetlands, and the DEP has ground water monitoring wells with years of acceptable test results in the area.

**25. Are there other contamination issues with this site?**

There are no contamination issues to our knowledge, according to initial research and preliminary borings. A Phase 1 Initial Site Investigation has been undertaken as a component of the consultant's work, as required by the MSBA. In the Geotechnical and Geoenvironmental Suitability Assessment report that was included in Appendix X.10 of the PDP the consultant indicated that "No evidence of a release of oil or hazardous material to soil such as stained or discolored soil or chemical odors was observe(d) in the test borings samples. During a site walk we did not observe any drums or pails at the ground surface or any stained or discolored surface soils." They concluded: "There are no known Geoenvironmental concerns at 585 Central Ave." Further testing of soils and ground water will be conducted as the design process moves forward.

**26. Will the community and neighbors have opportunities to participate in site considerations, including design, traffic, environmental issues, etc. that could impact the neighborhood?**

Yes. The School Committee and PPBC have a long and successful track record of engaging the community—and especially abutters and neighbors—in the design process. Neighbors were very much involved in design and traffic issues as part of the Needham High School, High Rock, and Newman construction projects. In fact, neighborhood participation and community interaction made each one of these projects better and improved traffic concerns and issues. The same will be true of the elementary school project proposed for Central Avenue.

**27. What is next in the process?**

Timelines and project target dates are outlined on the School Department's website. The MSBA also provides information on their website under the topic of "Building With Us" which can be found using the following link: <http://www.massschoolbuildings.org/building>