

Answers and More Questions

By Alex Grant, Longmeadow News- December 16, 2010

A week prior to the town vote on whether to fund the new high school, three letters came to light through a public records request made by a member of the group opposing the project. These letters were written in November 2009 by the state agency overseeing the funding of school building construction, the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA), to the School Building Committee (SBC), and they raised significant questions about the SBC's design choice.

These letters were a surprise to town residents who had assumed that the MSBA endorsed the new high school project without reservation. The three letters from the MSBA were not enough to derail the "Yes" vote in the June election, and they did not even tell the full story, as surprising as their contents were. What was missing, among other things, were the letters and emails written by the SBC to the MSBA. I have obtained that correspondence through my own public records request, and what follows is a summary of these new documents.

On November 3, 2009, the MSBA raised nine issues about the SBC's design choice, which combined partial renovation and substantial new construction. In that letter, the MSBA criticized the proposed renovation of the 1971 wing of the high school, and it said that there would be no reimbursement for that portion of the project. It also noted that the total size of the proposed new high school, which was 237,000 square feet, exceeded the MSBA's guidelines, which called for a school of 185,000 square feet. The MSBA noted that a 185,000 square foot facility would cost \$15 million less than the price tag presented by Longmeadow.

On November 6, 2009, Longmeadow's School Superintendent responded with a point by point rebuttal of the MSBA's letter. Among other points she made, the Superintendent defended the renovation of the 1971 wing, even though it contained spaces "categorically ineligible" for reimbursement, like administrative offices and the pool. The November 6 letter also agreed to reduce the new construction portion of the project, which, even standing by itself, had exceeded 185,000 square feet limit.

On November 10, 2009, the MSBA responded. It was clear that the Superintendent's November 6 letter, thorough as it was, had not allayed their concerns. The MSBA was asking fundamental questions about the SBC's design choice. It said that the new high school had "strong potential for renovation" and that "the overall condition of the building is solid." The MSBA said it had held this pro-renovation view since 2007, and that Longmeadow's feasibility study had not altered that view.

This presented a real problem. The MSBA Board was scheduled to vote on November 18, 2009. The November 10 letter indicated that given the "uncertainty" on the basic question of whether to "renovate or build" a new high school, it was unlikely that staff members would be able to provide a recommendation to the MSBA Board in time for the November 18 vote. That meeting would address not just Longmeadow, but other

schools, like Easthampton. The SBC had set out a precise timetable, and any delay could have jeopardized the chance to put the project to a vote in June 2010, and it could have allowed a number of other schools to jump ahead of Longmeadow in priority.

On November 11, 2009, the next day, the Superintendent responded, and there was a tone of urgency. Rather than going back and forth with letters, which seemed not to be working, she said she wanted a face-to-face meeting with the MSBA on November 13 or November 16. She wanted to stay on track for the November 18 Board vote. The Superintendent said it was "critical" that they "meet immediately" to address the outstanding issues.

On November 13, 2009, the MSBA's director of capital planning confirmed that they would meet with Longmeadow's representatives on November 16. In an email, the director raised still more questions, including why Longmeadow had imputed such a high cost to the renovation option, which the SBC had rejected.

On November 16, 2009, the big meeting happened. What was said is not the subject of any document held by the town of Longmeadow. The Longmeadow contingent, as identified by the Superintendent on November 13, included no less than 15 people, including Brian Ashe, Gale Candaras, and Richard Neal. The public documents do not reveal whether these politicians actually attended, but the MSBA's Executive Director later acknowledged receiving calls from both Ashe and Candaras.

On November 18, 2009, the MSBA Board approved the SBC's design choice, which put Longmeadow on a glide path to funding the project. Treasurer Timothy Cahill issued a press release. Ashe, Candaras, and Neal were at the press conference which trumpeted the decision.

This chronology provides a few answers; it shows how serious the criticisms of the SBC's design choice were; it provides a glimpse into a tense few days when the project hung in the balance. This chain of events raises even more questions. Namely, what happened at the November 16 meeting? What happened to the multitude of issues raised by the MSBA? How was the pro-renovation position, which was held by the MSBA for so long, changed?

Town residents may never learn the answers to these questions. It is clear, however, that some very important decisions impacting the town of Longmeadow happened out of public view. The full story, the debates, the doubts were never aired before the vote. I still count myself, based on the available information, as a supporter of the new high school. But Longmeadow residents deserved better from the SBC and their town leaders. They deserved to know, they still deserve to know, the rest of the story.

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