

Frequently Asked Questions

School Planning Committee

Center School Project

1. What is the Center School Project?

The Center School Project refers to the invitation from the MSBA to participate in the eligibility phase of their program which provides funding for school building projects.

After the completion of the middle and high school renovation and expansion projects in 2008, the School District shifted its focus to the condition of our primary schools. These buildings represented the last stage in Easton's vision to provide modern, updated learning spaces for our students. The condition of Easton's three primary schools continues to deteriorate. The buildings themselves are old, in need of serious repairs, and do not meet the demanding program requirements of a twenty-first century education. This quote is from the 2011 Annual Town Report, "The School Committee is concerned with the lack of progress to address the infrastructure needs at the three primary schools. Letters of Interest are submitted to the MSBA, however, given the extensive school infrastructure needs across the State, we are not confident that Easton's primary schools will be selected to participate in any of the MSBA programs." Since then, the District has continued to submit annual letters of interest to the MSBA and in February of 2017, we were informed that Center School has been invited to participate in the MSBA School Building Program.

2. What is the MSBA?

From the MSBA website: "The Massachusetts School Building Authority ("MSBA") is a quasi-independent government authority created to reform the process of funding capital improvement projects in the Commonwealth's public schools. The MSBA strives to work with local communities to create affordable, sustainable, and energy efficient schools across Massachusetts.

The MSBA, which has a dedicated revenue stream of one penny of the state's 6.25-percent sales tax, is collaborating with municipalities to equitably invest in finding the right-sized, most fiscally responsible and educationally appropriate solutions to create safe, sound, and sustainable learning environments.

In its ten-year history, the MSBA has made more than \$12.8 billion in reimbursements to cities, towns, and regional school districts for school construction projects. Instead of waiting years for reimbursement, districts now receive payments from the MSBA as costs are incurred, usually within 15 days of submitting a request through the MSBA's online "Pro-Pay System."

3. What does the invitation to participate in the MSBA program mean for Easton?

The invitation to participate in the MSBA program is an *extraordinary* opportunity for our community. The ability to secure millions of dollars in funding from the State for such a large capital project reduces the cost burden on Easton's taxpayers. The MSBA has developed a structured, rigorous program broken into 8 distinct phases which the MSBA defines as modules. Easton has been invited to participate in the first phase, the Eligibility period. This invitation does not guarantee that we will successfully complete all the steps which lead to state funding assistance for a building project. However, it is a positive sign that the MSBA supports our Town's request for funding related to the primary schools in Easton.

4. Who is the School Building Planning Committee?

The MSBA requires that local communities have a School Building Planning Committee, defined from Massachusetts statute, 963CMR:2.10, Paragraph (3) "for the purpose of generally monitoring the Application process and to advise the Eligible Applicant during the construction of the approved project."

By Special Town Meeting vote in November 1998, Easton has established two different committees who have oversight responsibility for school building projects during specific time periods of the project. These committees are the School Planning Committee and the Municipal Building Committee. It is the School Planning Committee who will work with the District leaders, the Town administration, and the MSBA. From Town Meeting vote, Article 15, in November of 1998, "Voted to establish a school planning committee... to recommend sites for new school facilities, to determine school program requirements, to select an architect, to work with the architect to develop building plans up to the design development stage, to prepare articles and presentations for town meeting and the public in support of school building projects, and to coordinate with the Municipal Building Committee."

5. Why doesn't the Town just repair the three primary schools we have?

The current primary schools are less than optimal learning environments for two reasons: the first is their state of disrepair and the second is their inability to meet educational programming requirements of our students.

In 2014, the Town of Easton retained the firm of Dore and Whittier to complete an extensive review and assessment of our Municipal and School Facilities. Their comprehensive report is available on the Town website, but their analysis indicated that the cost to repair these three buildings could equal \$30,000,000.00. These estimates are extensive and include HVAC, plumbing, electrical, roofing, site work, building exterior and interior structure – items such as new boilers, windows, lighting, ceilings, security systems, etc. Obviously, there is a great deal of complexity embedded in this number. For example, the requirement to bring any public building into ADA compliance is triggered when a specific percentage of cost or work on a building is completed. Given the extensive work that is needed in these buildings it is likely that those triggers would occur. It should be noted that this cost estimate of \$30M is for repairs only. It does not include any major changes, expansions, or significant reconfiguration of the current buildings.

The condition of our current primary school buildings is further complicated by the requirements of education in the 21st century. Our buildings don't have sufficient or appropriately designed space to provide for the needs of our students and their families. Our educators and administrators have become creative in their ability to turn closets into Physical, Speech, and Occupational Therapy rooms, hallways into assessment locations and libraries into classrooms, but these solutions are restrictive at best and, at worst, impede our ability to adequately support our learners. It is difficult to hold gym or music class at Center School; the weather can cause significant condensation on the gymnasium floor and make it a less than optimal place, potentially even unsafe, for those classes. Moreau Hall which was not constructed as an elementary school to begin with, has few actual classrooms; the ability to create distinct spaces is often accomplished with bookcases, storage units and bulletin boards. Parkview has multi-use spaces (gym and cafeteria) that are surrounded by classrooms; when they are being used, it creates considerable disruption for children in adjoining classrooms. Our educators continue to work incredibly hard to ensure our students receive a quality education and our custodial and DPW staffs save the district significant funds in their extensive work keeping the facilities in the best possible condition. There is a strong culture of character, caring, and collaboration at our schools, and our families feel a compelling connection to each of our schools despite the physical state of the buildings. However, our students and educators should have a physical environment that matches the caliber of the learning environment that each of our primary schools has worked so diligently to develop.

6. How much money will we get from the MSBA?

To be clear, the MSBA does not provide 100% reimbursement for building projects. However, the reimbursement from the MSBA significantly lowers the tax burden on communities and allows them to complete projects within a more bearable cost structure. Given that Easton has just entered the first phase of the MSBA program, it is not possible to provide a definite reimbursement projection.

7. If only Center School has been invited to participate, what will be do about the other schools?

The Town of Easton submitted all three primary schools to the MSBA. Each school required a separate submittal. The MSBA does not consider multiple schools on one submittal. However, during our eligibility phase, the MSBA has provided Easton with an opportunity to design a solution that may address the needs of all three primary school buildings. The MSBA will allow Easton to consider two design options and two site options for this project. A portion of the Dore and Whittier study in 2014 included visioning work focused on our primary schools. This visioning process identified several possibilities for our primary schools, one of which was to have a single facility that would address the programming needs of all three schools. The School Planning Committee has submitted two options to the MSBA for consideration: the first is a Center School Project which will meet the educational needs of the projected Center School population, the second is a District-wide project which will meet the educational needs of the projected town-wide pre-K through 2 population despite the potential size, the School Planning Committee is committed to maintaining small learning communities in the way the building would be designed. In addition, we have identified two potential sites for this work, one of which is the current Center School site and the other, the current Parkview site.

8. What is the Warrant Article for a Feasibility Study?

The School Planning Committee is requesting that Special Town Meeting appropriate \$1 million dollars to fund the Feasibility Study and Schematic Design phase for the Center School Project. This is a requirement of the MSBA process. This funding will allow the Town to: form the Project Team, document our educational program, develop and evaluate alternative design solutions, submit to the MSBA a preliminary design program, and develop a final design program and schematic design which allows for the scope, budget and schedule of the proposed project. The feasibility study is completed by a designer architect under the management of an Owner's Project Manager (OPM) hired by and in collaboration with the School Planning Committee. Although it is called a study, this step is an extensive plan, and a necessary investment to qualify for state funds. The budget is based on the MSBA recommendations which looks at comparable costs from other Districts who have recently undergone a similar study.

At Annual Town meeting in May of 2017, warrant article 8 transferred \$1 million dollars from the Avalon mitigation money to capital stabilization funds. The BOS, the School Committee, the Finance Committee, and the Budget Subcommittee have all agreed that the Avalon mitigation money be allocated for school specific projects. **If the feasibility study is not funded at Special Town Meeting on November 13, 2017, the window of opportunity to receive millions in MSBA funding for the Center School Building project will close.**

9. What are the major steps required to move this project forward and how is our community included in this process?

The School Planning Committee knows that for any building project to be successful, it requires community input, support, and approval. There will be many opportunities for educators, parents, and community members to participate in the process. Several of these opportunities are MSBA requirements connected to the project funding via town meeting and ballot box approval votes. The first of these will be the Town Meeting approval for the funding of the feasibility study. (See Question 8, above) The funding for the full project cost must be approved through both a Town Meeting vote and a Ballot box vote which authorizes the Town “be allowed to exempt from the provisions of Proposition two-and-one-half, so called, the amounts required to pay for the bonds issued in order to [Insert description of the Project]”. This is often referred to as a Debt Exclusion Override.

In addition to these important authorization milestones, the School Planning Committee, working through our OPM and design consultants will reach out to our community as we work through the 12 to 18-month feasibility and schematic design phases of this projects. Educators, parents, and community members must be allowed to provide critical input into the educational design program of our primary schools.