

October 20, 2023

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RE: The SBAC Voter Survey Results (Sept. 2023) Discussion at Meeting on 10/19/2023

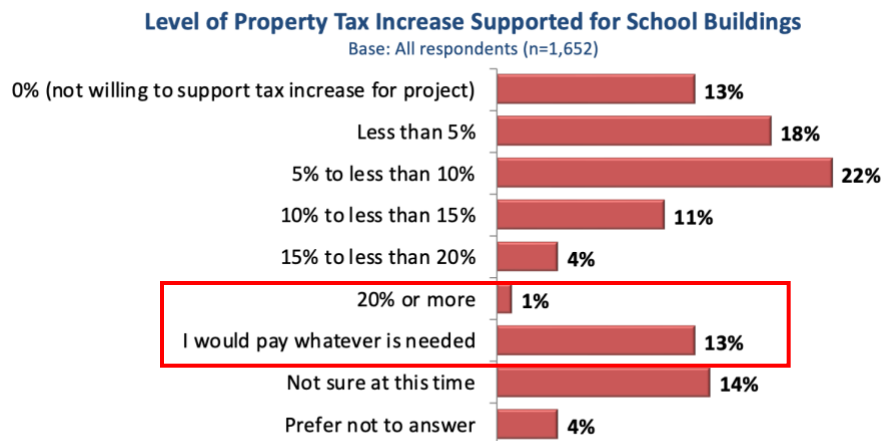
Dear Members of the SBAC:

Given that there was no advance notice of the presentation by committee member Mr. Benoit, as it was not included in the meeting materials, I think I struggled to fully put my thoughts together last night and I wanted to write a follow-up letter regarding the survey, its results, and the use of it as a tool in informing SBAC choices.

Data Regarding Supportable Tax Increase is Complex

First, and consistent with my initial public comments at the 10/19 SBAC meeting, the SBAC should be wary of drawing firm conclusions about the community’s level of support for various property tax increase scenarios. The survey does offer clear feedback that the cost/tax impact of the solution is a significant factor for voters. However, the data viewed as a whole also makes it clear that interpreting the survey based on the community’s past knowledge of a project that no longer exists, with an undefined and abstract solution, is complicated and requires nuance and an open mind.

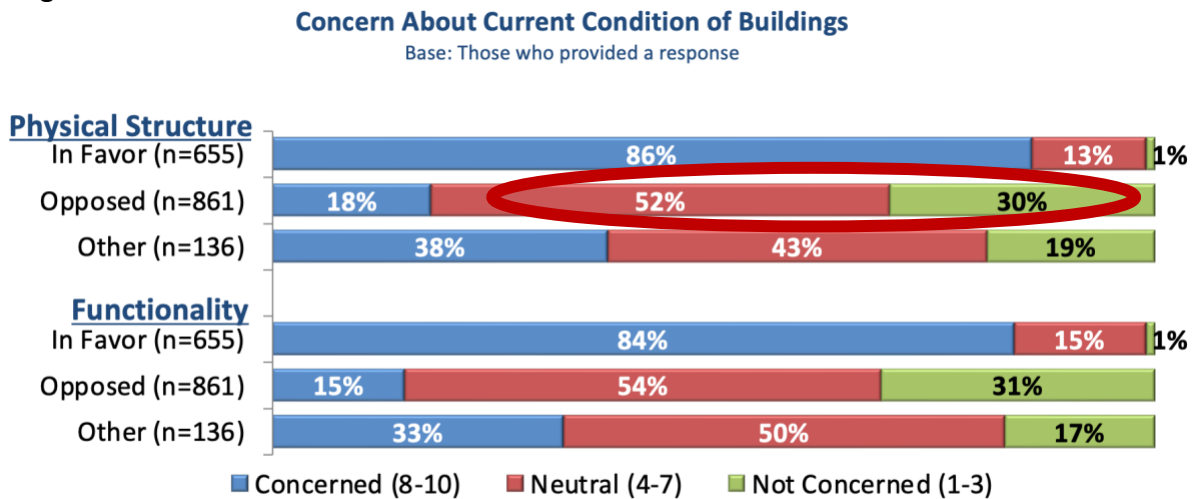
The survey responses for those in favor/against the November 2022 referendum were very similar to the actual vote, with 40% of survey respondents saying they were in favor and 38% of voters in favor of approving the referendum. ***Those 38% of voters supported a project with a tax impact that was widely believed to be in excess of a 20% tax increase. However, the survey results showed that only 14% of respondents would support a tax increase in excess of 20%.***



Q16. Based on your understanding of the needs of the school buildings in Cape Elizabeth, what level of property tax increase, if any, would you support for these needs? (Aided, single response)

So, what explains this disparity? It's hard to know what explains the disparity in survey response vs. vote when it comes to level of tax increase that would be supported, but going through one coherent explanation might be valuable. As set forth below, I think the data tells a story of survey respondents who believe the conditions of the buildings is completely suitable and so do not support spending tax money to “fix” something that isn’t broken.

Here is the survey question that gave rise to the answer: Based on your understanding of the needs of the school buildings in Cape Elizabeth, what level of property tax increase, if any, would you support for these needs? The vast majority of survey respondents who opposed the referendum also reported they are neutral or not concerned about the condition of the buildings:

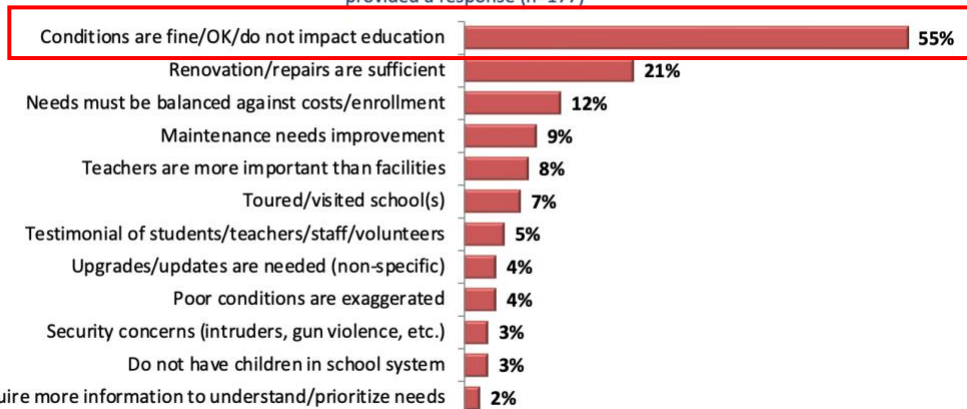


Q5. To what extent are you not concerned or concerned, if at all, about the current condition of the Cape Elizabeth school buildings? (Ten-point scale: 1="Not at All Concerned"; 10="Very Concerned")

In addition, of respondents who were “not concerned”, they reported that they reason they were unconcerned is because in their understanding, the buildings are fine:

Reasons for Level of Concern About Condition of Buildings: Not Concerned*

Base: Those who provided “not concerned” (1-3) ratings for both physical structure and functionality provided a response (n=177)



*Please see Appendix A for complete detail.

➤ Q6. Please explain your rating of not being concerned or being concerned about the current condition of the school buildings. (Unaided, multiple responses)

It naturally follows of course, that if you ask people who are largely unconcerned about the condition of the schools what sort of tax increase they support, it is completely logical that they will only support a corresponding small tax increase. In addition, many of the respondents who reported voting against the referendum also are older and do not have kids in the schools, and are therefore much more likely to be entirely unaware of the actual condition of the schools or the more modern educational programs and services that need to be delivered in schools today:

Vote on Proposal in November 2022 Election										
Base: All respondents										
November 2022 Proposal	Age				HH Income				Kids in Schools	
	18 to 44 (n=305) A	45 to 64 (n=638) B	65+ (n=617) C	Refused (n=92) D	<\$100K (n=380) E	\$100K - <\$200K (n=435) F	\$200K+ (n=448) G	Refused (n=389) H	Yes (n=561) I	No (n=1,062) J
Voted in favor of it	71% _{BCD}	40% _{CD}	18%	10%	19%	44% _{EH}	57% _{EFH}	17%	63% _I	22%
Voted against it	24%	53% _A	73% _{AB}	73% _{AB}	72% _{FG}	50% _G	37%	71% _{FG}	32%	69% _I
Did not vote	3%	4%	6% _A	3%	5%	3%	4%	5%	3%	5% _I
Not aware/ Not a resident then/ Not old enough then	2%	2%	2%	4%	2%	2%	2%	3%	1%	2%
Prefer not to answer	1%	1%	2%	9% _{ABC}	2%	1%	1%	5% _{EFG}	2%	2%

A,B,C,D,E,F,G,H,I,J: Significantly higher than the indicated column(s) at the 95% level of confidence.

➤ Q1. We'd like to understand what you liked and did not like about the \$115.9 million school buildings bond proposal presented in the November 2022 election. Did you vote on it and if so, were you in favor of it or against it? (Aided, single response)

If you walk up to someone who doesn't think they need a new car and ask: "how much are you willing to spend on a new car?" the answer will resoundingly be: NOTHING! It's entirely reasonable to look at the survey data and conclude respondents (and potentially voters) had the understanding that the condition of the building is fine and the educational needs are fully met, and therefore, they wouldn't support much of an increase if any.

Of course, that still doesn't fully explain, with real stakes in the voting booth, why 38% of voters approved a tax increase of 20+% vs. 14% of respondents saying they would support the same. But I do think the data is telling us very clearly there is much more to the story of "Cape Elizabeth voters won't approve a tax increase of more than 10%" than is currently being repeated around the Cape Elizabeth community and was raised by SBAC members at last night's meeting. It's clear the mission of the SBAC is to arrive at a solution that is good for students and teachers, but also falls within a financial sustainable model. To that end, I hope that this survey and these results aren't cherry picked, taken out of context and used without the full nuance and context of the additional survey information and the voting results.

Setting a Budget Cap based on Survey Data is Misguided

Second, and this flows directly from my cautionary message above, looking at the "level of property tax increase supported for school buildings" data to conclude that Cape Elizabeth voter will support a 10% or less tax increase is far too simplistic. People will only vote to spend money on things for which have value to them, or which have a clear fiscally responsible purpose. The survey data clearly shows the very real voter concerns with cost and tax increases

but is not definitive as to what voters might support under a new proposal or with different information than they had at the time of the November 2022 referendum or time of the survey.

Financing Data

It was my understanding that presentation materials for SBAC or other public meetings needed to be made available to the public in advance of the meeting. I was disappointed to see financing options and numbers presented in connection with a discussion of the survey results, even if only as the sole opinion of an SBAC member. Without a full discussion of the methods and sources of financing or the timing of financing it seems irresponsible for the SBAC to entertain such a lengthy discussion and presentation of what amounts to fictional financing numbers.

One of my major concerns is that, based on the last referendum and community rhetoric that cherry-picked tidbits from public records, I can easily see how such a premature presentation of financing information will later be used, out of context, against the SBAC and in the community to polarize people with respect to the school buildings issue. I am so grateful for all the time and effort this committee is putting into a fresh look at how to build community support for and meaningfully address our aging school infrastructure and I would hate to see that work compromised or undone by presentations of unvetted information.

Another concern is the inaccuracy of the information presented. What if the SBAC decides on a phased approach to renovating and/or rebuilding Cape Elizabeth Schools? Depending on the timeframe of the various stages of the project and the projected costs of each stage, the financing would not follow the schedule and costs that the SBAC member so stridently insisted were correct. In addition, until other sources of financing have been discussed – an opportunity that many community members felt was lacking before the last referendum - neither the SBAC nor the community will have a good understanding of what non-taxpayer resources Cape Elizabeth has available to contribute to and/or offset the cost of the project. This renders a discussion of interest rates, bond amounts, and payment terms wholly premature with the accompanying risks of compromising the solid work of the SBAC to build consensus.

Thank you for your consideration of the above, your continued thoughtfulness, and for each of the SBAC members for their significant investment of volunteer time. I am excited for all the work that is yet to be done and I look forward to seeing the process as it moves forward.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Biermann