

SBAC Data Evaluation in relation to Option B/C and Option E1/E2  
March 6, 2024

The **objective** of the Cape Elizabeth SBAC September 2023 voter survey was to **“provide insights into the parameters of a school buildings project, if any, Cape Elizabeth residents would support.”**

Including:

- feelings about specific aspects of the proposal and changes that would increase likelihood to support a proposal
- Perceived importance of specific building features
- and preference for new construction, renovation, or both

## **SWOT ANALYSIS:**

### **STRENGTHS:**

- Both options reduce cost, reduce tax increase, and reduce scope (70% of respondents reported these combined would increase likelihood of support)
- Option E1/E2 is better at including new systems to minimize annual repair costs, safety and security standards, music/ arts programs, designs that meet special needs and environmentally friendly buildings which are important to most respondents
- It has not been discussed much yet, but construction impact to students is likely to be contentious. It appears that Option E1/E2 may cause less disruption
- Option B/C is likely a lower tax increase/cost in the short term which is easier to sell to previous no voters

- SBAC is making effort to increase transparency, ensure financial estimates are sound, and inform voters (all identified in survey)
- School administration is working on applying to state for funding and seeking other funding
- SBAC is ensuring plans align with demographic and enrollment trends
- SBAC has a foundation of 38% voter support for two new schools and 22%+ tax increase. And a process, options and plans that voters report are likely to increase their support.

## **WEAKNESSES:**

- Option B/C: risks losing support of 23% of voters who supported the previous proposal and only want new buildings.
  - Politics is the art of addition and losing a significant portion of supporters - heads in the wrong direction to get this passed. I don't see evidence that equal gains among those who voted no can be achieved to make up for these potential lost votes plus the additional votes needed to exceed 50%.
- Voters are likely to expect that any option is a total solution that will last 3-5 decades.
  - When/if another large investment or new building(s) are required, or if ongoing security, air conditioning, sprawl, wayfinding, small classrooms, etc. concerns come up, this will erode voter trust and support since they thought they were paying to get this all fixed. It's difficult to reach voters to ensure understanding of this level of short-, medium- and long-term financial / educational tradeoffs/ impacts proactively.

- Option E1/E2 is a compromise that makes everyone upset.
  - Supporters, especially the 60% of yes voters (23% of all voters) who only want new construction, may be disappointed/upset. Similarly, the no voters who see declining enrollment and no need for new buildings are also likely to be disappointed/ upset. It may be hard to gauge public feedback in relation to how the vote will go.
  
- Stressing short term cost/tax impacts will bias voters in favor of B/C and stressing medium/long term costs will bias voters in favor of E1/E2.
  - People will value these differently and need all the information. This is difficult to communicate.
  
- **COST:**
  - In the survey, those who voted for a 22%+ increase in taxes in the November 2022 school bond were three times less likely to answer that they would support a tax increase of 20% or more. The financial data in your survey is not an accurate measure of voter behavior.
  
  - A tax increase of 20% or greater has a higher chance of repeated failure than success
  
  - A total cost of under 100 million could help. People are sensitive to cut offs of over and under ten
  
  - It's unlikely that voters would expect the tax increase to be **60%- 75% less** than the November 2022 school bond (from 22-25% down to 5-10%). It's also likely this low of a tax increase will result in a project that previous yes voters will not support.
  
  - Decisions related to value, ROI, timelines, education building investment, and price are too complex to

accurately measure in a one-time survey. It's also very difficult to survey how people will actually vote.

- **COST GUIDEPOSTS:** A tax increase of between 11% and 19% (to clearly reduce tax impact), with one new school (to keep yes voters' support) and renovation (to capture additional voters, a majority who prefer combined new/renovation and smaller scope). As you push towards 11% you risk losing yes voters with reduced scope and as you push towards 19% you risk not capturing additional voters with reduced cost.

## **OPPORTUNITIES:**

- **Only 40-41% of all respondents felt concerned about the current condition of the building physical structure and/or functionality** (38-39% were neutral and 19-20% not concerned). Respondents who voted yes are far more likely to feel concerned
- Many who voted no found the project excessive especially in relation to **declining enrollment**
- Those feeling positive about "**modern security design**" were far more likely to vote yes (76% vs 19%)
- Feeling **informed** about the proposal was correlated with higher level of tax increase support
- significant percentage of responses to most questions were ambiguous (no opinion on project approach, not sure about tax increase, neutral on condition of current buildings, etc.). These are likely voters who were undecided and open to new information.

- Cape Courier, email/ mail, and **friends/family** were the primary sources of information to learn about schools
- Those living in Cape Elizabeth **15+ years** were significantly less positive about **all aspects of the proposal** than those residing under 15 years.
- Communication: School administration is working on applying to state for funding and seeking other funding
- Communication: SBAC is ensuring plans align with demographic and enrollment trends

## **THREATS:**

- Feelings about the **pending re-evaluation** significantly influenced many responses. It decreased support.
- Increased age and residing in Cape Elizabeth 15+ years correlated with significantly decreased support
  - Some of this may be related to history and trends we can't capture/ identify or change
- Competing narratives and communication, misinformation, lack of information
- Lack of concern for current school building's physical structure and functionality
- Lack of consensus
- Larger forces: National and State politics will impact how people vote and who shows up to vote, Economic trends, etc.

## Future Survey Possibility

- Should be done as long after re-evaluation is completed as possible. Feelings about the re-eval will skew results
- Questions about which construction option people prefer is far beyond the ability of a one-time survey to effectively present and measure.
  - People cannot read and digest complex new information they are expected to make decisions about as part of a survey. Digestion of new information takes place over time, prior to the survey. Then the survey can assess what information they have absorbed.
- Questions about how much tax increase people support were not representative of voting behavior in the previous survey.
- Completing a repeated, consistent effort to communicate information about the new school project widely over time is very important to ensure your respondents are answering questions related to this project and not the previous one. An appropriate use of a survey is to assess what information voters understand, to better target communications.
- However, your previous survey provides opportunities for targeted communication and education that have not yet been undertaken.
- Once the re-evaluation is behind voters and you have reached consensus (or close to consensus) on an option, you could consider an educational/values survey to help teach, increase support, and target your efforts.
  - For example: you could ask voters some version of: if they were aware that the two engineering/architectural firms have deemed that the middle school cannot be renovated. This question provides them with information likely to increase their support (feeling informed correlated with

increased support in your survey) and their answer gives you a sense of what information voters know.

- You could ask voters some version of: if they were aware that the Cape Band program is X large, and its band room doesn't fit.... (Most voter's support music but are not concerned about the building function- they don't know).
- You could ask about tours (this informs them they are important and available) and use responses to make tours more effective
- You could ask questions that voters report caring about (in the previous survey) regarding the current building accommodations using facts that accurately reflect deficiencies
- You could ask if a program that allows them to pay tax increase with housing equity when it changes hands resonates or increases their likely hood of support.

These kinds of questions

But your survey is only as good as it is useful. Its use is as a guide but primarily it's a tool for communications.

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