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[CE SBAC] Middle School Options

1 message

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To: cesb@capeelizabethschools.org

Cc: cetowncouncil@capeelizabeth.org, cesbac@capeelizabethschools.org

Dear Cape Elizabeth School Board,

First I want to express my sincere gratitude for the commitment of the School Board and the SBAC. I can't imagine the number of hours spent and the hours of sleep lost to maintain and further our town's public education. Just formulating this letter has taken me hours, so I truly appreciate everything you all have done and the different areas of expertise and perspective.

After spending a couple of days digesting the SBAC meeting in which Option B was voted to move forward and rewatching the meeting, there are a couple of issues that continue to rise to the top of my mind. Most relate back to one of the very first meetings that I attended where Lisa began gathering community input about what our priorities were for the new schools.

The participants in that meeting were extremely clear that SECURITY/SAFETY and MODERN DAY EDUCATION were of highest priority, and I think that everyone can agree on that.

Regarding SECURITY, which I would hope everyone can agree is of absolute importance, I have to say that I became nauseous when I heard Lisa and Dr. Record use words on Tuesday like "sightlines" and "wayfinding" and express grave concerns about the hallways, perimeters and exterior doors when answering questions about Option B, issues that have limited ability for fixing with a renovation due to load bearing walls. I hesitate to even publicly write and talk about how the hallways are opportunistic for active shooter situations for fear of publicizing it. It has been made very clear that Option E provides the greatest degree of safety and that is just not debatable. "Good enough" with entryway portals is simply not good enough.

My first child was 8 years old and in second grade when 28 people were murdered in Sandy Hook Elementary School, most of them 6 and 7 year old children. I was subbing at Pond Cove during that time period, and my son was in second grade. That time period was horrific and I'm sure we all want to forget it and not talk about it. My son is now 20 years old and just finished his sophomore year of college. School shootings now

occur with regularity. It is unfathomable to me that 1) we haven't already fixed the entryways and 2) that we would pour 77M into Option B, which does not immediately (and cannot eventually) address safety needs to the extent that Option E does. Furthermore, we would be putting students in mobile classrooms for two years? How on earth can that be safe from external threats?

The differentiation and clarification between SECURITY and SAFETY also leaves me extremely unsettled with Option B. With well-known behavioral/bullying issues in our middle school and a well-documented deterioration of adolescent mental health/anxiety/depression issues nationwide, are we really okay with continuing to have the plethora of unsupervised spaces and hallways? And shuffling students to temporary locations during a renovation? As a licensed mental health professional, this is deeply concerning to me.

I keep hearing mention of the additional space that a renovation will provide and the declining enrollment, but none of that really matters when it comes to what a renovated building can offer in terms of safety and security. Lisa was very clear that Option B is limited in its ability to address all of the issues. As a community our primary responsibility is to meet the security and safety needs of our children. To pretend that Plan B is an adequate safety option is simply not true.

Next is the EDUCATIONAL priority identified in that early meeting. Again, it has been made extremely clear that OPTION B provides little in the way of collaborative spaces and modern-day teaching techniques, and that OPTION E is the only one that will provide that from the get-go, with the least disruption due to temporary classrooms. And again, much has been made about OPTION B increasing the square footage and enrollment going down, but the amount of space and number of students has nothing to do with the inability to change many aspects of the existing building to meet the ideals of modern teaching. Lisa was very clear about that as well.

Regarding impact on taxpayers, I fully appreciate the need to not spend excessively and to consider the tax impact on our residents. I had a baby and my husband lost his job during the 2008 recession. We know hard times. A LOT of people who support OPTION E have known or currently know hard times, and we STILL support E. Many people who voted no in the last school vote because of the misinformation about 25% tax increases are now supportive of E. Of the 21 people who spoke at the beginning of Tuesday's meeting, 19 spoke in favor of Option E. We all have a recognition that it will give us the greatest value, the biggest bang for our buck, while best meeting our priorities of safety/security and a 21st century education (24+ years into said century).

Lastly, something else that continues to rise to the top of my thoughts as I digest Tuesday's meeting, and which I spoke about during the final public comment section, is

that Cape Elizabeth has the LOWEST TAX RATE OF ALL SEVENTEEN TOWNS IN CUMBERLAND COUNTY. This was new information to me, and I truly find it disheartening to repeatedly hear “we can’t afford it” and “our seniors can’t pay for a tax increase” while towns like Windham, New Gloucester, Freeport, Westbrook, Gray, and Standish, which presumably have higher rates of poverty than Cape Elizabeth, have higher tax rates and better general assistance programs to help those in need. I can attest that my hometown of Freeport, where my mother still lives, is very creative in their programs for general assistance including heating and medical. To borrow a well-known phrase, we CAN do better. For BOTH our children and for our seniors.

I could go on, but I wanted to express these gravest of concerns about Option B moving forward to a town vote. At risk of being called stupid or that my position is stupid, it is my conclusion that spending 77M on a short-term and only partially-corrective solution in the areas of safety/security and modern day education is irresponsible and I would not vote for it.

Sincerely,

Cherie Gustafson
25 Jewett Road

Cc Town Council, SBAC

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