

Uniting Cape Elizabeth: The Case for Option B in the November 2024 Referendum

By Michael Hussey
SBAC Community Member

Introduction

Cape Elizabeth stands at a pivotal moment in shaping the future of our cherished school system's infrastructure. As we approach the November 2024 referendum, it is essential that we come together as a community to make a decision that will positively affect generations of students to come. This memo outlines the strategic reasons for supporting Conceptual Design B, a comprehensive plan that addresses the critical needs of all three schools while respecting our community's financial realities and preserving the green spaces we hold dear.

Option B represents our best opportunity to make a significant investment in our school buildings, one that will enhance the educational experience for every student in our district and set us on a path of a sustainable and fiscally responsible master plan for continually improving our schools in ten-year cycles. It is a vision that balances our aspirations with our responsibilities, offering a path forward that is both ambitious and achievable. And it is the choice that can bring this town closer together instead of pushing us apart.

Celebrating Our Successes

Cape Elizabeth's educational excellence is a testament to the community's values and priorities. The achievements of our students extend beyond the prestigious colleges and universities they attend. Our students excel in a variety of fields, including arts, athletics, community service, and leadership roles, demonstrating the comprehensive development fostered by our schools. These successes underscore that the true essence of education lies in the quality of teaching and the supportive environment provided by engaged parents and a committed community. These elements, which cultivate well-rounded, capable, and civic-minded individuals, will always outweigh the importance of the physical structures in which they are schooled. Our schools have consistently demonstrated that with the right support and resources, students can achieve greatness in a multitude of fields, preparing them not just for college, but for life.

The Time is Now

However, while our educational achievements continue to shine, the physical condition of all our school buildings—our high school, middle school, and elementary school—tells a very different story. Years of underfunded capital improvements have accumulated a significant backlog of needs that can no longer be deferred. Each of our schools faces critical infrastructural challenges that must be addressed to ensure that our facilities match the high standards of our educational programs.

The Risks of Inaction

The time has come to make serious investments to revitalize our educational infrastructure. As we approach the November referendum, it is imperative to understand the weight of this decision: selecting the option most favored by the town's voters is crucial to our success. The School Building Advisory Committee has been granted a unique mandate and budget to resolve our schools' challenges. Should we fail to achieve a positive outcome in November, there will not be another SBAC with a million-dollar budget to orchestrate these crucial changes – the question will be put on

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hold indefinitely – so this presents our last opportunity for many years to come to secure this level of investment from our taxpayers. And what if we kick the can down the road a year or two because we can't agree now? Are we confident the economic climate won't be worse than it is now? What would the effect of an economic recession be on our prospects for a new school investment?

Feasibility in the November Referendum

Our survey data reveals that among the proposed options, Option B is the only one with a feasible chance of passing in the upcoming referendum. Demographic realities and our community's economic sentiment, exacerbated by a 20% revaluation-induced property tax increase for more than 33% of the town, places significant constraints on support for extensive new investments like those required for Option E. According to the survey conducted by Portland Research Group, support for E currently sits at ~40% potential support, and this is even before any opposition campaigning has begun.

Furthermore, it is important to note that every other school referendum in Maine over the past three years requesting more than \$60 million has failed—and not just narrowly. These referendums have failed decisively, reflecting a broader state-wide trend of resistance to 100% local funding of high-cost educational projects. The aspirations for Option E, while commendable, are out of step with both local and state-wide economic realities. People who believe Option E is the favored option of the electorate do not understand the results of the 2022 referendum, the 2023 town-wide survey, and the 2024 town-wide survey, which have consistently indicated a hard ceiling to the tax increase range which they are willing to countenance. And now, after more than a year of efforts by the SBAC at educating the public on the various tradeoffs of the options on the table, Option B, with its potential support of 57% to 60% of voters, stands as the ONLY viable option that aligns with our community's financial capacity and willingness to invest in our schools.

A Contrast of Visions

Option B

As we consider the path forward for our school infrastructure, it's important to recognize that Options B and E represent two distinct visions for the future of our educational facilities and our community.

Option B embodies a vision of sustainable growth and community-centered development. It prioritizes consolidating our campus footprint, building inward and upward to create a more efficient and cohesive learning environment. By centralizing our existing campus, Option B addresses nearly all the logistical challenges that currently plague our students and staff daily. It prioritizes critical safety improvements, special education, performing arts, and physical education needs that have been overlooked for too long. Unlike Option E, Option B includes a dedicated performing arts theater and a full high school-sized basketball gym, ensuring that our students have access to the facilities they need to thrive.

Option B presents a fiscally responsible approach, allowing us to make necessary enhancements over time without overburdening taxpayers. All new construction in Option B includes modern,

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efficient HVAC, and there are cost-effective paths to cooling existing classrooms and learning areas still to be explored. This vision aligns with the preferences expressed by a broad cross-section of our community.

Option E

In contrast, Option E prioritizes new construction over the value of what we already have. While the aspiration for newer facilities is understandable, this approach doesn't fully account for the diverse needs and values within our community. Option E duplicates essential functions by adding a second cafeteria, new bus lanes and parking lots, and separates other shared logistics and services across both schools. Additional labor costs to staff these logistical additions have not been considered in the SBAC's cost analysis.

Unfortunately, supporters of Option E on the SBAC have shown a willingness to put the middle school's needs over those of the high school and elementary schools. They have even proposed removing efficient HVAC from Option E in order to lower the perceived tax impact, a decision that raises concerns about over this proposal's current cost estimates, sustainability, and environmental friendliness. Option E also includes a much smaller basketball gym, limiting our ability to host events and accommodate physical education classes. Physical education classes get much needed new space to conduct classes with in Option B, but far less in Option E.

In contrast to Option E, all new construction in Option B includes modern, efficient HVAC, and based on conversations with Efficiency Maine, there are additional cost-effective paths to cooling existing classrooms and learning areas still to be explored. Paring back Option E requires so many tradeoffs, including negating the improvements that should be taken for granted in a new construction, and yet it still cannot offer a fiscally balanced approach that will attract enough people who previously voted No in 2022.

Land Use and Preservation

Option B champions a sustainable and future-focused approach by intelligently consolidating our existing school footprint. This strategy preserves the vital green spaces and community sports fields that are not just amenities, but essential components of our town's identity and quality of life. These areas serve as hubs for recreation, community gatherings, and sports—activities that enrich the lives of all our residents, not just our students.

In stark contrast, Option E presents a plan that would lead to extensive campus sprawl, consuming these invaluable community resources with no current plan for how to replace them. The proposed layout for Option E would irreversibly pave over these established green spaces to accommodate new buildings, additional bus drop-offs, and expansive parking areas. This not only represents a significant loss of community assets but also introduces practical challenges that will disrupt the daily lives of our students and families for decades to come. For instance, the potential need to bus students off-campus for basic activities like sports would not only complicate logistics but also sever the deep connection our students have with their immediate environment. Such a scenario undermines the cohesive, community-centric educational experience we have worked so hard to cultivate in Cape Elizabeth.

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Option B prioritizes the preservation of our precious green spaces and community sports fields. By consolidating our footprint and building vertically, rather than creating further campus sprawl, we can enhance our facilities without sacrificing the outdoor spaces that are so integral to our school and community life. As a coach of three girls soccer and girls basketball teams, I know firsthand how hard it is to get access to practice and game space. Destroying campus sports fields and downgrading our middle school's gym to a much smaller basketball gym, as proposed in Option E, will have long-lasting negative effects on our students and community.

We must prioritize a vision that enhances our educational facilities without sacrificing the outdoor and indoor spaces that our community values so deeply. Option B not only addresses the infrastructural needs of our schools but also preserves the environmental and recreational assets that make our town a desirable place to live. By choosing this option, we affirm our commitment to smart growth that respects both our educational ambitions and our environmental responsibilities.

Option B Solves Needs Across All Three Schools

Option B presents a comprehensive solution that addresses critical needs across our entire school district. By allocating over \$15 million to long-overdue repairs and upgrades at the high school, we ensure that the pressing issues faced by our staff and students will no longer be neglected. The SBAC is currently discussing ways to cut renovation and new construction from the high school to make Option E less expensive. These cuts of critical upgrades are unnecessary with Option B, making resource allocation more balanced and equitable across the three schools.

Strategic Enhancements for Future Needs

Option B adopts a future-focused approach by centralizing and elevating our campus facilities. The plan centers on constructing a new cafeteria shared by the elementary and middle schools, topped with a second floor dedicated to STEM, special education, and guidance counseling. This new two-story structure provides both schools with modern classroom space, creating flexibility in existing classroom wings to accommodate 21st-century learning needs.

By building centrally and upwards, Option B preserves our precious green spaces, preventing unnecessary sprawl while maintaining the campus's natural beauty and community ball fields. The centralized facility will also serve as a foundation for future infrastructural improvements, paving the way for additional phased enhancements that can elevate our educational infrastructure that seeks to reclaim outdoor space instead of destroying it.

By focusing on foundational centralized improvements now, such as the new cafeteria, specialized classrooms, and a centralized performing arts hub, Option B lays the groundwork for future developments in a consolidated and efficient footprint. This phased approach aligns with prudent financial planning, allowing continued investment in our schools over time without overburdening taxpayers. It's a strategy that balances our aspirations with our responsibilities.

Improving Safety and Health Facilities

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Option B also prioritizes significant and long overdue improvements in campus safety and health facilities. New centralized administration offices will be strategically placed to oversee school entrances, enhancing security and oversight. Additionally, the plan calls for a new, adequately equipped nursing facility for our elementary school, replacing the current substandard space to better meet our students' health needs.

Enhancing Performing Arts and Physical Education

Further, Option B replaces the existing radically inadequate “cafetorium” with a performing arts auditorium/theater, designed to support and enhance our middle school's distinguished music and performing arts programs. The new auditorium will address the poor acoustics, inadequate seating arrangements, and the cramped stage of the current space. Equipped with retractable seating, it will serve as a flexible venue for various school activities throughout the day, responding to a longstanding request from the physical education department and enhancing our capability to host a diverse range of events.

A Comprehensive, Campus-Wide Approach

Overall, Option B represents a balanced solution that strategically enhances our facilities, improves safety and health resources, and supports our educational programs while preserving the character and functionality of our campus. This comprehensive, campus-wide approach ensures that no school is left behind and that our investments are targeted to deliver the greatest benefits for our students, staff, and community.

Environmental Impact

In our modern throw-away culture, there's a pervasive belief that newer is inherently better, that the latest technology or the newest infrastructure must be superior. This perspective, while often grounded in optimism, overlooks the profound benefits of sustainability, heritage, and responsible stewardship. I challenge this notion, that newer automatically equals better, and invite my fellow committee members and our community to rethink what truly constitutes progress and improvement. Do not lose sight of what we are losing by demolishing all that property!

The environmental impact of demolishing and rebuilding from scratch is significantly greater than renovating and repurposing our existing structures. The embodied energy—the sum of all the energy required to produce any goods or services—present in our current buildings is substantial. By choosing renovation over new construction, we're not just preserving physical structures but also conserving the energy and materials that originally went into them. This is not merely an economic decision; it's an environmental imperative.

A study by the Preservation Green Lab concludes that reusing an existing building and upgrading it to be as efficient as possible is almost always the best choice regardless of building type and climate. It can take up to 80 years for a new energy efficient building to offset the negative climate change impacts created by its construction.

By integrating sustainable renovation practices and energy-efficient upgrades into our planning, as proposed in Option B, we demonstrate our commitment to both our children's future and the climate action promises made by our town. We have an opportunity to lead by example, showing

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our students the importance of making environmentally responsible choices. By choosing renovation over new construction as the main way forward, we not only create a better learning environment but also contribute to a greener future for Cape Elizabeth.

A Challenge to Leadership and the Community

To those who strongly favor Conceptual Design E, I recognize your passion for our schools. However, I challenge all of us to consider the risks of an all-or-nothing approach – particularly one that has a near zero possibility at the ballot box. If we fail to find a compromise, we risk leaving our schools without any improvements at all. Leadership and community members must consider the broader implications of their decisions: to support a practical, achievable project that makes dramatic long-term improvements in our schools and their footprint, or to hold out for an ideal that will never come to fruition due to financial and practical constraints.

Over the past three years, Cape Elizabeth has invested nearly \$2 million in comprehensive planning and community engagement efforts to determine the best path forward for our schools. Despite these efforts, the feedback from our town has remained essentially unchanged from the 2022 referendum to the 2023 survey and now with our most recent survey: there is a significant resistance to any plan that involves substantial tax increases without external financial support. This resistance is not just a reflection of economic conservatism; it is a broader concern about the sustainability and long-term implications of such an investment.

Unity Over Division

Pushing forward with Option E, in disregard of this clear and repeated community feedback, carries risks far beyond fiscal imprudence. It threatens to deeply divide our town, pitting neighbor against neighbor and eroding trust in local governance. The pursuit of an idealized vision, however well-intentioned, must not come at the cost of community cohesion. We have already seen tensions rise over this issue, and to continue down a path that the majority has rejected and will reject again is to invite further discord and dissatisfaction. Option B is the only option with meaningful baseline support from every demographic in town. It is the only option that can bring us together instead of further dividing us.

Almost everyone in town wants to contribute to the improvement to our schools. That is clear from the survey data. The compromise to be had is for people who are nervous about tax increases to stretch their budget and be willing to accept a 5-10% increase – while those who wish we could have new schools, accept that the best chance, the most inclusive chance, is to start a process outlined by Option B. That's meeting in the middle – that's how you bring a community together. The SBAC, the school board, and the town council can only ignore this at our town's peril.

Stop Ignoring the Majority

To ignore the consistent messages we have received from our neighbors would be to abdicate our duty. It would undermine the very purpose of our committee, the logic by which the town council and school board assembled the SBAC, which is to bridge gaps, forge consensus, and ensure that any school investment plan not only meets educational needs but also has the robust backing of our community.

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I believe it important to recognize the dedication and passion of those who worked tirelessly in 2022 to promote the construction of new schools. Their commitment to educational excellence is commendable and deeply appreciated. However, we must also listen to the voices of the entire community, including those who have called Cape Elizabeth home for most, if not all, of their lives. Our surveys have provided invaluable insights into the perspectives and concerns of all our residents, not just those who are most vocal or well-organized.

As we strive to make the best decisions for our schools and community, it is essential that we approach this process with empathy, open-mindedness, and a willingness to find common ground. Option B represents a vision that seeks to balance our educational aspirations with our community's values and financial realities. By pursuing this path, we have an incredible opportunity to create a more unified and sustainable future for our schools, one that enjoys broad support from all corners of our town.

Reflecting on Our Educational Values and the Path Forward

As we navigate through this critical decision-making process, let us reflect on what matters most in education. Cape Elizabeth's reputation for excellence has been built on the strength of our educators, the commitment of our families, and the character of our students. These are the foundational elements that have made our district a leader in Maine for so many years.

While we all want the best facilities for our children, we must also recognize that great teaching and strong community support will always transcend physical spaces. Let us never lose focus on supporting our educators, engaging our parents, and inspiring our students.

As someone deeply invested in this community—with two daughters in Pond Cove Elementary school, two in Cape Elizabeth Middle School, and a future kindergartner on the way in 2029—I am fully committed to ensuring the sustained excellence of our schools. My family's future, like that of many others in this town, is intertwined with the fate of this decision.

To my fellow committee members, our superintendent, our school board, and all community members passionate about our schools—I invite you to consider Option B not as a compromise of values, but as an opportunity for consensus. By supporting this plan, we demonstrate our commitment to action over idealism, to progress over gridlock, to unity over division.

Let us not risk doing nothing because we couldn't agree on everything. Instead, let us take this step forward together, united in our commitment to our children, our schools, and our community – and let's bring this community together around the single largest locally funded education project in Maine's history. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Michael Hussey
SBAC Community Member