

Advisory Committee
Schools and Capital Subcommittees
Report on Warrant Article 4 – Funding for Driscoll School
October 15, 2019

The Schools and Capital Subcommittees of the Advisory Committee held a joint public hearing on Warrant Article 4 on Tuesday, October 2nd, beginning at 6 pm in Room 111 of Town Hall.

In attendance from the Schools Subcommittee were Dennis Doughty, John VanScoyoc, David Lescohier, Mariah Nobrega, and Cliff Brown (chair), and from the Capital Subcommittee John Doggett, Pam Lodish, Amy Hummel, Harry Friedman and Carla Benka (chair). Also attending were School Committee member Helen Charlupski; Acting Superintendent Ben Lummis; Deputy Superintendent for Administration and Finance Mary Ellen Normen; Article 4 petitioner and Town Meeting Member, Pct. 10, C. Scott Ananian; and Deputy Town Administrator Melissa Goff.

Background

Article 4, as submitted, is a duplicate of Special Appropriation item 32 under Article 9 in the May 2019 Town Meeting warrant. With the defeat of the Debt Exclusion ballot question, item 32, which called for the appropriation of funds for the construction of a new Driscoll School, could not be approved by Town Meeting. Town Meeting did, however, pass a resolution which stated “that Town Meeting urges the Select Board to prepare a debt exclusion question specifically for a 4-section Driscoll School and to place said question on the ballot of a special town election, to be held no later than the Special Town Meeting in Fall 2019.” The resolution was approved by a vote of 153-57-15.

On September 26, 2019, the School Committee unanimously voted to endorse a Long-term Capital Plan that included a 4-section Driscoll School, a 5-section Pierce School, and a ninth school at a location to be determined. The Committee’s goal is to have a new Driscoll School ready to open in the Fall of 2022.

To date, the Select Board has not placed the called-for debt exclusion question on a ballot, therefore if Warrant Article were approved by Town Meeting in November, it would need to include conditional language regarding a debt exclusion vote. (That vote would need to be scheduled no more than 90 days after the November Town Meeting.) Alternatively, Town Meeting could vote to convert the article to another resolution.

It should be noted that while the School Committee has developed a long-term plan to address the impacts of enrollment growth, that plan currently does not address the need to relocate the offices of up to 60 district staff members by September 2020. The need for such relocation stems from decisions to not renew the leases both for office space at 24 Webster Place and for classroom space at 62 Harvard Street. Forty-two Webster Place staff and an additional 18 staff members, who will be moved out of the Sperber Education Center in order to accommodate the students now attending classes in the Harvard Street building, will be without workspace next fall. School administrative staff estimates that between 15,000 and 25,000 square feet of office space will be needed, but it has not been made clear how these numbers were calculated.

Discussion

The Subcommittees' discussion of Article 4 focused on two major issues: project cost and possible accommodation of district staff in a new school building. Several members emphasized the fact that delaying the project even by a few months dramatically increases its costs, calculated by some to be by \$175,000 for every week of postponement. To not move forward as expeditiously as possible was, in their view, financially irresponsible.

Other members stressed that a "fresh set of eyes" to review the plans for the school with the goal of reducing the currently estimated \$108.8 million price tag was highly advisable. They raised such questions as whether the atrium feature, viewed by some as "dead space", was a necessary element of the design, and whether the inclusion of performance space, described by a former School Committee member as responding to the Brookline community's expressed need for performing arts facilities, added an unnecessary cost to the school project.

Examples of new schools designed and built less expensively than those in Brookline were mentioned; a recent school project in Newton was cited as a case in point. In response, it was noted that the Newton school was for students in kindergarten through fifth grade, whereas Brookline's kindergarten through eighth grade schools require spaces such as science labs, which can drive up project costs by up to 20%.

Helen Charlupski, Chair of the School Committee's Capital subcommittee, responded that Brookline builds schools that last, which is why they don't need

frequent significant renovation and that recent school projects, including Driscoll, are designed with "value engineering" and cost limitations in mind.

Regarding need for additional district staff office space, questions included: whether the Driscoll design could be modified to incorporate at least some of the displaced offices; 2) whether such space could be added at a reasonable cost; 3) why accommodations for the offices of district programs formerly located at the high school were not part of the plans for the renovated and enlarged high school; and 4) what assumptions lie behind the stated need of 15,000 – 25,000 square feet of office/work space for district staff.

Approximately \$270,000 of unexpended funds remains in the FY 19 allocation for Driscoll School – Schematic Design.

Recommendation

Based on the goals of moving the Driscoll project forward, reducing projects costs, using the construction of a new building as a potential opportunity to accommodate district staff, and acknowledging the required conditional nature of any funding recommendation at this time, by a vote of 6-1-3, the joint Subcommittees recommended the following amended motion:

That the Town appropriate, borrow, or transfer from available funds up to \$108,800,000 to be expended under the direction of the Building Commission, with any necessary contracts over \$100,000 to be approved by the Select Board and the School Committee, to reconstruct the Driscoll School, with the understanding that the final stages of project design, which follow voter and Town Meeting approval, will include efforts to further optimize the project's design in terms of both program delivery and cost efficiency, including the evaluation of the feasibility of providing office space for district-wide staff of the Brookline Public Schools, and contingent on the approval by Town voters of a debt exclusion to fund the debt service on said borrowing.

Subsequent to the hearing and the Subcommittees' vote, Town Counsel and the Moderator were asked to review the language of the recommended vote. In response, the Moderator suggested the following additional wording that is underlined and in bold font:

That the Town appropriate, borrow, or transfer from available funds up to \$108,800,000 to be expended under the direction of the Building Commission, with

*any necessary contracts over \$100,000 to be approved by the Select Board and the School Committee, to reconstruct the Driscoll School, with the understanding that the final stages of project design, which follow voter and Town Meeting approval, will include efforts to further optimize the project's design in terms of both program delivery and cost efficiency, including the evaluation of the feasibility of providing office space for district-wide staff of the Brookline Public Schools, **provided that such appropriation shall be contingent** on the approval by Town voters of a debt exclusion to fund the debt service on said borrowing.*