

A STATUS REPORT ON THE PROPOSED NEW HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE COOPERATIVE SCHOOL DISTRICT

By Warren Henderson, Chairman
Building Committee

Since the Building Subcommittee was formed in late October we have met five times, made two public briefings to the Cooperative School Board and held one open forum to hear questions and comments from the community. A second forum is scheduled for Thursday December 19th at 7:00pm in the High School Annex (old Jr. High) cafeteria (note location change, not in Science Lecture Hall). In addition, as Committee Chair I have met many times with representatives of the architects, the administration and others working to produce the best recommendation for a new high school. Also, we have established an email address (newsproposal@sau16.org) to provide another way for people to express their views on this important project. Every email received at this address has been printed and distributed to the Building Committee and the administration for their information and consideration.

Our goal in this process is straightforward. We have the opportunity to build a new high school on a large site in an advantageous location. We need a solid plan to present to voters in March so that they may make an informed decision as to whether to rebuild on the existing site or build new. Voters, then, will weigh both options and make their choice. School construction to either rebuild or replace a much needed facility will then begin on one site or another.

This report is intended to be another aspect of our effort to keep the public informed and involved in the planning process for this proposed school. When parts of this report rely on information which is tentative or findings which are preliminary, I will try to so indicate. My intention is to address as many of the questions posed to the School Board and/or the Building Committee as possible.

The main components of this status report may be broken down as follows:

- The building (size, design, elements, athletics)
- The site (size, conditions, environmental impacts)
- The location (transportation, traffic)
- The cost (estimated total cost, comparatives)
- Other (always a favorite!)

THE BUILDING

Preliminary plans show a new building of about 330,000 square feet capable of housing 1800-2000 students (sufficient to meet the latest 10 year population projections) which is two-story throughout the classroom wings and much of the core facility and one-story in

those sections which require extra height (auditorium, gymnasium, library) and the space which surrounds them. The school is all in one building rather than two or more separate structures.

The design of the new school is based on “flexibility”. Because educational philosophy and strategy changes, each of the eight classroom wings (four on each floor) can be organized by grade, by discipline or to accomplish other objectives. Each classroom wing is subdivided by a central hallway and can house 450-500 students in classrooms which average 900 square feet. Each half of each classroom wing begins with a science classroom/lab (16 in all).

In addition, as expected, the building includes appropriate spaces for music and art, computers/technology, special education, physical education, and other essential educational elements. These spaces will be detailed on a building layout which will be made available once finalized. As of this date (Dec. 12) this layout is about 98% completed. While some spaces are still being assigned and reassigned, the building “footprint” has been finalized, which permits us to determine a reliable approximate cost.

The building also includes a full gymnasium which can seat 2000, an auditorium which can seat up to 1000, a cafeteria designed to accommodate students in only two or three lunch periods rather than stretching throughout the day, and a substantial library resource. The building also allocates space for normal school needs such as administration, guidance, nursing, maintenance, etc.

The building is designed and located on the site in a manner so as to be efficient in design and materials while giving students and staff a sense of light and space. Lockers don't line hallway walls (a chief cause of hallway crowding and chaos). Lockers are organized in groups outside each classroom wing. The building is located to bring morning sun into classrooms, entrances and common space. Areas such as the cafeteria are designed to be useful as space for groups of classes to gather or for special projects during non-lunch periods, thus increasing the efficient use of space. While there are an appropriate number of building exits, access to the building can be carefully controlled for security purposes. There is much more than can be said here about the building design. Each of the presentations which the School Board is offering to interested groups starting in January will feature a detailed plan of the school building and site.

Before leaving this topic it is important to note that the site is large enough to provide tremendous improvements in the number, location and quality of athletic fields. The new site will house a new fully equipped football stadium with a field that is surrounded by a track and related track-and-field facilities. In addition, four soccer/field hockey/lacrosse fields will be located together and a baseball field plus a smaller softball field will be located in the lower western corner of the site. In addition there will be outdoor basketball and tennis courts. All of these facilities will have full and convenient use of the 1000 parking spaces at the site.

THE SITE

The proposed new school sits on a 118-acre tract of land located in the northwestern part of Exeter just off what was formerly Route 101 and is now known as Route 27. The site is bordered on one side by Old Town Farm Road. The land is farmland, used most recently for a horse farm.

Beginning last summer, soon after the School Board took an option on the property, professional analysis of the property was begun. Most of this work has been coordinated by Appledore Engineering, a Portsmouth-based civil engineering firm in business since the 1980's and home to 40 skilled professionals with just the kinds of diverse expertise this project needed.

The main questions about the school site posed to Appledore Engineering are:

- 1) Is there enough "uplands" (non-wetlands) to locate the school, parking, athletic fields and access roads?
- 2) Is there hazardous waste, ledge, or other impediments to construction?
- 3) Is the soil of sufficient quality to provide a safe and stable building platform?
- 4) Can the site support septic fields and/or a packet wastewater treatment plant of sufficient size to serve the facility, and will sufficient water be available to provide for the water needs of the school?
- 5) Are there wetlands? If so (there are *always* wetlands!) how much and where on the site?
- 6) How much wetlands will likely be disturbed by the project?

The responses are as follows:

- 1) Yes, there is enough upland to build the school. About 2/3 of the site is uplands and nearly all of it is connected (rather than having remote upland parts of the site that you need but can't get to without disturbing wetlands). This is illustrated on the site map presented to the School Board at their Tuesday December 10th meeting.
- 2) No, there is no hazardous waste on the site that has been identified to date. There has been a complete walk of the property and relevant state and local records have been reviewed for clues about possible contaminants. About the worst thing found on the site is a lot of horse manure, something that you'd expect to find on a horse farm. That manure *will* have to be removed, however, before the project can be completed. Ledge was found only in two areas of the site toward one corner, far from where the building is planned.
- 3) Yes, the quality of the soils on the property will sustain this project. 10 test pits were dug in areas throughout the site, and 6 borings have been dug in the area where the building and parking is planned (more borings are planned) to determine soil quality, ground water and water table, ledge, etc.

- 4) The preliminary findings reported by Appledore Engineering confirm that the site can easily sustain septic fields to treat the waste generated by the school or a wastewater treatment plant. "Perc" (percolation) soil tests confirmed this. Present plans are to site septic fields in one corner of the site between two sports fields.

At present, access to sufficient water can only be estimated. Once a test well is dug, we will have more definitive information. Permitting for that well is underway. In the meantime, Appledore Engineering has consulted with RE Prescott Pump Company, one of the most experienced firms of its type in this region, for their estimate of water availability based on their work in the area and relevant expertise. RE Prescott Pump believes that sufficient water will be available for the school by digging wells on the western part of the site (the opposite side from Old Town Farm Road).

One factor in that finding is that schools are not particularly large water users, at least for a building of this size. The school needs about 12,000 gallons of water per day to keep on site water tanks full. By comparison, one rule of thumb to estimate residential water use is 150 gallons of water per day per bedroom. What that means is that if only 30 3-bedroom houses (both conservative estimates) were built on this site, those houses would need 13,500 gallons of water, more than the school is projected to need. In addition, school water use is much lower during summer months because school is not in session.

The building committee acknowledges that more definitive findings are needed in this area and have conveyed this to our professional consultants.

- 5) Yes, there are wetlands on the site. Thankfully, the two main areas of wetland are on the southern and western borders of the property, leaving the center area free for building, parking and fields.

- 6) About 3.5 acres of wetland will likely be disturbed by the school project. While we would prefer for the amount to be zero, impact of this amount for a project this size should not keep the school from going forward so long as proper care is taken with permitting and construction.

THE LOCATION

The site for the proposed new high school is located off of Exit 9 of Route 101. From that exit traffic would travel west about .8 miles down Route 27 (old Route 101) to the intersection of Route 27 and Old Town Farm Road. From this point it is about ½ mile to the school site.

Not surprisingly, families who live on that part of Old Town Farm Road don't much like the idea of all the school traffic coming up their road. I wouldn't like it if it was me, either. That's one reason the Building Committee has worked since its formation to obtain "alternate primary access" to the site directly off Route 27. Simply put, we'd like to be able to either buy an easement or a small piece of property so we could build a short

road from Route 27 to the school site and not go up Old Town Farm Road for anything other than secondary or emergency access. In fact, there's money in the cost estimate for that. However, we cannot guarantee that we can obtain alternate access. All of the land which could provide that access is privately owned, and no landowner may be willing to sell either property or easement. We will continue to make every effort to address this issue responsibly. As a last resort, we would use that ½ mile of Old Town Farm Road to provide access to the site and address related road improvement issues.

Whether the high school stays or moves, it generates a lot of traffic. Mostly car traffic and some bus traffic. We can make only a broad estimate of how moving the high school would impact the area it would leave and the area where it would be located. Some elements of that estimate are as follows:

Currently, about 100 students walk on average, a number unlikely to grow even as the school population grows because the area around the existing site is “built out”.

Roughly 500 students take the bus and about 1000 ride or drive (the remainder are the walkers).

As school population increases, there is no reliable way to determine what portion will bus vs. ride or drive, no matter where the school is located. However, it is safe to assume that the number of students who walk will drop to virtually zero. With regard to bus transportation, as student population increases, it is estimated that the same number of buses will be required with either plan. At the new site, added buses might be needed to provide for students who now walk. However, more buses might be needed at the current site as existing parking problems may cause fewer students to drive.

How would this change in traffic affect the two sites? Some reasonable conclusions would be:

At the site of the new school, traffic would substantially increase. On a positive note, this area of town is not densely populated and the area roads are lightly traveled. In addition, the roads on which most students would approach the school have substantial capacity. It is reasonable to assume that most cars driving to the school will use Route 101 and use either Exit 9 eastbound or Exit 9 westbound to approach the school. Obviously, Route 101 has the capacity to handle this traffic. Traffic approaching the school from Route 101 will travel about .8 mile on Route 27. It's worth noting that, until about four years ago, what we now know as Route 27 in that area was Route 101, the most heavily traveled east-west roadway in the State of New Hampshire. This road has handled traffic loads far in excess of what the school would place upon it.

The only significant traffic issue at the new school site is the last ½ mile which either would travel along a newly constructed road built to serve the school or along Old Town Farm Road. The Building Committee prefers the former, as is discussed above. Traffic flow would be heaviest during the hour before school begins and the hour at which it ends. It is not possible to accurately gauge likely traffic volume and we have no

comparative measure. We know how many parking spaces there are at the existing school but we don't know how many additional cars park off site or how many cars drop off students either at the high school site or on a nearby road. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the volume of cars will be sufficient to transport the 1100 that currently drive or ride plus a portion of the 100 who now walk (the remainder of that group opting for bus transportation).

Parking at the new site would be vastly improved over current conditions. The site plan calls for 1000 parking spaces at the new school site, sufficient to meet the needs of faculty, staff, students and visitors. Buses waiting in line to either pick up or drop off students would also be entirely on school property, rather than in the street as is sometimes the case at the present site.

Turning to the traffic impact on the site of the existing school, and on traffic impacts around Exeter generally, it appears that relocating the high school would provide significant traffic and parking relief in the area surrounding the school and, to a lesser extent, on main roads in and out of town. From conversations with Exeter police and with school personnel, we conclude that relocating the high school would mean substantial traffic relief on Front Street, Lincoln Street, Gill Street and Linden Street. Traffic congestion relief on downtown Exeter roads would result from changing traffic patterns. It is reasonable to assume that high school students living in Stratham, Newfields, northern and eastern Exeter and much of Brentwood would no longer have to drive through downtown Exeter to get to school. In fact, only Kensington and East Kingston, the two least populated towns in the co-op, would be more likely to drive through Exeter to get to the new school site.

In addition, we believe that the problems related to students who park off-campus and walk through area neighborhoods to access the existing school site would disappear, as all students who drove could park on-campus.

THE COST

Cost of the new high school: Our preliminary estimate for the cost of building the new high school off Route 27 is roughly \$49.5 million. As has been said publicly, this number is likely to rise and/or fall by several hundred thousand dollars before we get our final figure as the remaining variables are factored in. That said, we are confident that this estimate is within 1% or so of the final cost. This cost will include:

Land acquisition

All architectural and engineering work

Site improvements

Building the high school

Building all related parking, athletic fields and other site work

An allowance for furnishings and equipment (over and above what will be brought over from the existing site)

The estimate includes necessary contingency funds in accordance with standard practices. The estimate includes funds to either acquire alternate primary access to the site and build an access road or to make road improvements on Old Town Farm Road.

Cost comparison, new high school vs. renovation of existing campus: To date, Co-op voters have committed:

\$35.5 million in the original vote to renovate the existing school, plus
\$ 3.5 million subsequently to account for added site costs, plus
\$ 4.3 million last March to separate SST from the main site (the new high school plan contemplates keeping SST at the existing facility).

That adds up to \$43.3 million to renovate the existing high school and move SST off site vs. \$49.5 to build a new school on a bigger site in a better location. Further, it is worth noting that discussions are currently underway with the architect and construction manager for the renovation project to update construction costs, as has been done each year since the project was originally approved. The total cost may go up or down again based on those findings, which should be known within the next week or so.

OTHER

What we now know about the building, site, location, transportation and cost is incorporated into the report above. This information will be expanded and finalized as more details are known. Many of the questions we have received relate to those subjects. However, some additional questions raised relative to the new high school project:

Q -- “Can't we buy the three houses that sit between the high school and old junior high, along with the Court Street property owned by the Exeter School District, and use that extra space to expand the renovation project?”

A – The three houses located near the high school have a combined appraised value of \$584,000 and have a total acreage of .93 acre (that's less than one acre). Even if those houses could be acquired for their appraised value, paying nearly \$600,000 for less than one acre doesn't make much sense because you pay a lot and gain a little. This doesn't include demolition costs. The Court Street property has about 2.8 useful acres out of a total of 3.8. Even if the land was gifted to the Co-op, it would cost an estimated \$170,000 to demolish the existing building and improve the site and then it could only be used for parking (with a mile walk or shuttle service) unless money was spent to rebuild on the site. In sum, this option would generate less than five acres at a land cost of almost \$800,000, a poor value in our estimation.

Q -- “Can we use the Kensington land recently acquired as a remote extension of the existing high school site?”

A – Most of the Kensington land is not suitable for substantial construction. The 18 useful acres on the site were intended to house sports fields.

Q -- "Could we buy the Tyco properties and relocate the high school to that site?"

A – The total size at the Tyco property, that being the land and buildings on both sides of the road, is 52 acres. However, according to the Realtors who have listed the site, only 13 of those acres are "upland", severely limiting the utility of the site as a high school setting. In addition, the \$5.5 million asking price includes corporate buildings which are well designed for business use but not necessarily for school use.

Q -- "Won't putting a school on the Route 27 site cause a housing boom in that area?"

A – Not likely. This concern was based on the impact of extending municipal water and sewer to the site. Residential lot sizes may be reduced, and thus density increased, in areas served by water and sewer. Therefore, the thinking went, there could be a housing boom and the related adverse tax and infrastructure impacts. However, the current plan is NOT to extend municipal water and sewer to the site, laying that concern to rest.

Q -- "What is the plan for the existing high school site if a new high school is built?"

A – This determination will be made by the School Board, although the Building Committee intends to offer recommended criteria to govern future use or sale. A few things we can safely say about the existing site are:

It will be in use as a high school for the three years it will take to build a new school. Therefore, any stated intention about the existing school site would simply be speculation. Even if it was the will of the voters to sell the existing site, you couldn't really vacate the property until 2005.

Voters may dictate its use(s) and/or its disposal. In fact, there will be three annual elections between now and then.

SST will likely stay in its current space because the State of NH provided 100% of the funding for its construction in 1980 and we have an obligation to provide at our costs this or its equivalent. Some adjacent space may be added to it if the high school is relocated. This option would be preferable to the alternatives identified to date to move SST off site.

Building Committee recommendations for future use of the existing site would be made this month or in early January and will be made public as they are delivered to the School Board.

FINAL COMMENTS

This status report is designed to be just that – a snapshot of a complex project which people from the towns of SAU 16 are working hard to complete and present for the consideration of the voters on March 11, 2003. We know that many people have wanted a new school all along. We know that some will fight the site on Old Town Farm Road no matter what. We know that most people will wait to hear the facts and weigh their options before they make a decision.

If this report contains errors, omissions or misstatements, that's my fault and no one else's. I want to thank everyone who is serving on the Building Committee for their time,

energy and guidance. More information will be presented as it becomes available. Any group which wishes to receive a full presentation about the proposed new high school starting the first week in January is invited to contact School Board member Donna Bates at 772-9001. Ms. Bates is coordinating these presentations.

We will do our best to present voters with the best option we can conceive. A safe and happy holiday to all.

Warren Henderson