

UXBRIDGE HIGH SCHOOL NARRATIVE

Part II - THE OPTIONS (FEASIBILITY STUDY)

This is the second of three articles about the high school project. This article focuses on the work and recommendations of the Feasibility Study.

Feasibility Study:

At the 2008 Fall Annual Town Meeting, the town voted funds for a high school feasibility study in partnership with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). This action was in response to the 2006 Statement of Interest sent to the MSBA to address the accreditation problem at the high school. The School Building Committee (SBC), who is responsible for the 2006 Statement of Interest document and the subsequent feasibility study, took into consideration overcrowding in the lower schools as well as the high school accreditation problem when considering the options. The SBC, with the assistance of a project manager and architect, considered nearly twenty alternatives. The two major options focused on: (1) the construction of a new high school on Quaker Highway and (2) renovation of the existing high school. The SBC held a series of public hearings in the Fall of 2009 to communicate information about the MSBA process and solicit feedback from the community and elected officials. After receiving feedback from the Board of Selectmen, School Committee and Finance Committee, the School Building Committee recommended a new high school on the Quaker Highway site as the “preferred project”. The recommendation was submitted to the MSBA on October 9, 2009 with full documentation.

Massachusetts School Building Authority¹

The MSBA, which is the state agency responsible for funding the school building program, has been working with the School Building Committee on the building project. The MSBA provides funding up to 56% for approved school projects. In its review, the MSBA expressed concerns over the construction cost, operating cost and projected enrollment for the new high school. The discussions between the town and MSBA focused on two options: (1) the construction of a new high school at the Quaker Highway site and (2) additions and renovations at the Uxbridge High School, Whitin Middle and Taft Elementary Schools.

The MSBA also talked about a “conceptual plan” for changes to the High School, Whitin and Taft. This plan placed the total costs between \$35 to \$38 million, with the cost to the town between \$14 to \$15 million. However, there were no details to the plan and the MSBA later pulled the plan when it realized the “conceptual plan” did not meet the educational needs of the schools. The MSBA did not consider this a third option but

¹ “Through its grant program, the Massachusetts School Building Authority works with local communities to identify school facility needs, develop fiscally responsible and educationally appropriate solutions, and create safe, sound, and sustainable learning environments.” <http://www.massschoolbuildings.org/>

rather a “scaled down” addition/renovation for the SBC to consider and determine if it met our educational needs.

The following chart, “Estimated Comparison Cost Analysis” provides a short comparison of the “New Construction” and “Addition/Renovation” alternatives:

Summary of Options:

	New Construction Quaker Highway	Addition/Renovation UHS – Taft – Whitin
Square Footage (added or reconfigured ²)	123,000	86,570 ³
Duration (months)	24	36
Opening Date	September 2013	September 2014
Project Costs:		
High School	\$43,050,000	\$33,118,735
Taft Elementary	0	8,861,250
Whitin Middle	0	3411,875
Little League Fields	0	500,000 ⁴
	<u>\$43,050,000</u>	<u>\$45,891,860</u>
Not-Eligible for MSBA Reimbursement Cost	\$2,363,639 Additional Site work included in Town’s Cost Below	\$1,500,000 For Modular or swing Space
Eligible MSBA Reimbursement Cost	\$40,868,361	\$44,391,860
Estimated MSBA Reimbursement of Eligible Costs	\$23,000,000 56.53%	\$26,870,393 60.53%
Town’s Cost	\$20,050,000	\$19,021,467
Annual Operating Costs	\$313,122	\$45,877

For a more detailed comparison of the two options, please visit: <http://www.uxbridge-ma.gov/Pages/SBC.php>. **Information** is also available at the Town Clerk’s Office.

The School Building Committee continued to feel that the construction of a new high school was the best option for Uxbridge. It came to this conclusion based on the following facts:

² “Reconfigure” which means gutting and rebuilding the existing space

³ The Addition/Renovation option would add 50,780 sq. ft. to and reconfigure 35,790 sq. ft. of our school facilities. To the high school, the plan would add 22,580 sq. ft. and reconfigure 27,940 sq. ft. It would add 22,000 sq. ft. to Taft and reconfigure 3,100 sq. ft. To Whitin, it would add 6,200 sq. ft. and reconfigure 4,750 sq. ft.

⁴ Does not include possible land acquisition.

The “Pros” for New Construction

1. The construction of a new school will provide the necessary space to meet the programmatic standards for a high school.
2. A new high school will resolve the facility problems NEASC identified in its accreditation review.
3. The addition of a new high school, together with the realignment of space in the current UHS, Taft and Whitin schools, will help address the town’s school choice out problem⁵ and remove our dependency on lease space.
4. The construction of a fourth school will address overcrowding in Taft and Whitin. Taft is currently at 110% of capacity while Whitin is at 138%.
5. The realignment of grades PreK – 2 in the Taft school places this age group together in one building instead of three as we presently have. This Early Childhood configuration allows for improved curriculum alignment and specialized services needed for students at this age.
6. Placing grades 3-5 into the Whitin School and grades 6-8 into the present high school puts our 5th grade students into an elementary school. Fifth grade students are better suited educationally, emotionally and socially for an elementary school structure, not a middle school.
7. There is consistency among research studies that smaller schools produce greater academic achievement and positive school climate. The addition of a new high school will provide school sizes at an educationally sound level.
8. The construction of a new high school will take two years while the addition/renovation option will take three to five years.
9. The added space will permit the “consolidation” of programs currently housed in costly rental space.
10. The construction of a new high school keeps the athletic fields that will be lost under the renovation/addition option. The replacement of these fields is not covered by the MSBA reimbursement parameters.
11. For an additional \$1 million, the town will get a better long-term investment with the new construction option. The construction of a new high school encompasses a total of 123,000 square feet. Under the Addition/Renovation option 86,570 square feet will be reconfigured and/or added.
12. Finally, the building of a new high school at the Quaker Highway site will help facilitate bringing water and sewer to South Uxbridge in conjunction with the water well field initiative approved by Town Meeting in 2007.

The “Cons” for Addition/Renovation

1. The addition/renovation of Taft Elementary and Whitin Middle schools will perpetuate, not resolve, the overcrowding in these schools.
2. Traffic flow congestion will worsen. There will be no room for additional parking or fire lane access to the rear of the building.
3. In the case of Taft Elementary the renovation will expand the school to a 900 student facility. From an educational stand point this is too large for early

⁵ While no guarantee can be made, communities experience a positive change in school choice funds as a result of new construction.

childhood learning. This will also limit the possibility for additional full day Kindergarten classes.

4. Less than 30% of the space in the high school will be reconfigured⁶ under the “Addition/Renovation” plan.
5. Due to the minimal addition/renovation to the high school and the continued overcrowding at Taft and Whitin, it is not anticipated that this option will help resolve the School Choice out issue.
6. The addition/renovation option will cause a great deal of upheaval in schools impacting the education of students in all grades during the three to five year period of renovation.

On March 31 the MSBA Board of Directors voted to approve Uxbridge “to proceed into the schematic design for the construction of a new, 123,000 square-foot facility to replace the existing Uxbridge High School, subject to certain limitations, on the Quaker Highway site.” The April 2 letter from Katherine Craven, Executive Director of the MSBA, conveying this decision, stated:

“The MSBA concurs with the District’s legislators that the time has come for the community to decide whether or not they support the shared vision and proposed project, and we strongly agree that this is not only the responsibility of the community leaders but, as evidenced in most districts, can only truly be accomplished by the local leadership.”

The MSBA laid out several major conditions for the project in its April 2 letter:

1. The proposed new school must not exceed 123,000 square feet and meet MSBA guidelines.
2. The total project budget must not exceed \$350 per square foot and total no more than \$43 million.
3. The MSBA’s maximum total facilities grant would not exceed \$23 million.
4. The District would hold at least three additional public hearings to inform residents “of the process, the educational program needs, the advantages and disadvantages associated with each option, including the MSBA’s proposed conceptual addition/renovation option, the cost to the community and the associated tax impact, a complete discussion of the operating budget to support each option and any associated overrides or other impacts to the taxpayers.”

At the request of the District’s legislators the MSBA’s Board of Directors rescinded two requirements previously set forth by the agency requiring:

1. Affirmative votes from the Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, School Committee and School Building Committee for the new high school option.
2. A non-binding referendum, by town-wide ballot vote, “which would specifically ask for the community to show its support for a specific project of a specific budget with the estimated amount to be funded solely by Uxbridge.”

In following up on the most recent stipulations set forth by the MSBA:

⁶ See Footnote 3.

1. The three additional public hearings about the project are to be held April 5, May 12 and June 15, 2010.
2. On May 21 the architect and project manager will present the School Building Committee with the schematic design for the \$43 million high school. This information will also be reviewed in the last public hearing on June 15, 2010.
3. The Board of Selectmen voted to hold a June 19, 2010 Special Town Meeting on the project, followed by a general election (Proposition 2 ½ override vote) on June 22, 2010.

The next addition to this Narrative (Part III) will provide the cost and tax implications associated with the recommended solution.