

**Memo: In Support of Option B**  
**Michael Hussey, SBAC Community Member**  
**May 21, 2024**

**Introduction**

This memo outlines the reasons I support Conceptual Design B for the upcoming November 2024 referendum. It examines its potential for success at the referendum, its benefits for students and teachers, sustainability, fiscal responsibility, and environmental impact. Most importantly, it seeks to find common ground among all stakeholders who want the best for our children and community.

**The Only Path to Success in November**

Our survey data reveals that Conceptual Design B is the only option with a realistic possibility of passing in the upcoming referendum. The community's current economic sentiment, exacerbated by a recent revaluation, places significant constraints on support for extensive new investments like those required for Option E, which currently sits at ~40% potential support. Option B, on the other hand, has potential support of 57% to 60% of voters.

Although Option B has the most potential support, it still faces an uphill battle. If successful, it would be the most expensive locally funded school referendum in Maine history. With 22% of voters likely to vote no regardless, there is limited room for error. This underscores the need for unity and compromise.

This past year, we have gone out of our way to educate the public on the needs of our schools. We've put comprehensive educational material in every mailbox, repeatedly posted in the Cape Courier, and we haven't faced any organized opposition yet. People told us that they feel much more informed this go-around, but it didn't move the needle at all towards a willingness to pay more than 10% for this investment, which the vast majority recognizes is needed.

**No School Left Behind**

One of the critical advantages of Option B is that it ensures no school is left behind. Currently, the elementary school is undersized at only 146 square feet per student, which is at the bottom range of State guidelines, and it will remain so for the next decade or more if we choose Option E. Option B addresses this issue head-on by adding a second floor with at least 18,000 square feet of new construction dedicated to the elementary school. This addition provides new space for classrooms, unmet education programs, and administrative needs, freeing up space in the existing buildings that can be repurposed and renovated for collaborative learning spaces, gathering spaces, and flexible/agile classroom configurations. By right-sizing the elementary school, we ensure that all students have access to modern, flexible learning environments that cater to their educational needs. The additional space allows for dedicated areas for special programs, further enhancing the educational experience for all students.

Additionally, Option B means no compromises are necessary at the high school, which has at least \$15 million in critical investments needed. This ensures that essential updates and repairs

can be made, addressing urgent infrastructure needs and providing a safe and modern environment for high school students. By meeting these needs without compromise, we maintain high standards across all educational levels in our district.

### **Fiscal Responsibility**

One critical aspect that must be considered is the financial burden associated with delaying critical needs investments. Option E advocates have twice sought to remove the entire investment in the high school and reduce investments in the elementary school, but they did not receive majority support from the committee. If these attempts were successful, it would leave the high school in very poor condition and neglect essential needs at the elementary level.

Removing these investments from Option E would delay over \$20 million in essential investments needed across our schools. If these costs are not included in the bond, they will inevitably severely impact our CIP budgets, potentially leading to tax increases of 5% to 10% or possibly more in the next few years. The bill for these critical needs is overdue, and we've been communicating this to the town for the past year.

It's much more fiscally responsible to bond these costs over 30 years instead of paying for them all upfront. By spreading the financial burden over time, we ensure that the necessary investments are made without causing immediate and significant financial strain on the district and taxpayers. This approach allows us to maintain and improve our educational facilities sustainably and responsibly.

### **Near-Term Financial Management**

Conceptual Design B sets the stage for a gradual and financially manageable near-total rebuild of our school infrastructure over the next 12-20 years. By focusing on foundational updates now, such as a new two-story centralized cafeteria with 12 new classrooms, alongside a performing arts hub, we lay the groundwork for future developments in an efficient, centralized footprint. This allows us to preserve our limited outdoor space and move the campus inward and upward. Together, the schools are far more efficient than separated.

Option B allocates resources equitably across all three schools, ensuring that no school is left behind. This balanced approach prevents the need for future emergency repairs and reduces the likelihood of unexpected expenses that could disrupt the district's financial planning. By addressing the most pressing needs now, we avoid the pitfalls of deferred maintenance, which can lead to significantly higher costs down the line.

### **Long-Term Financial Planning**

Looking ahead, a master plan based on Option B envisions building an additional 50,000 square feet of new space 10-12 years from now, which would involve taking down the oldest sections of the school and replacing them with a two-story section adjacent to the new central cafeteria. This expansion is estimated to cost approximately \$35 million in today's dollars.

The phased approach aligns with prudent financial planning, ensuring that we can continue to invest in our schools over time without overburdening taxpayers. In ten years, we'll be able to consolidate the remaining debt from the current bond into a new bond, allowing us to fund the expansion while only raising taxes in the 2.8% to 3% range. By waiting to consolidate this first bond into a new bond, we can pay for that new construction with less than a 3% tax impact. Please see Larry Benoit's work on this - "Concept B: Phased Long Term Plan."

This strategy balances our aspirations with our responsibilities, enabling us to gradually modernize our school facilities while being mindful of the community's financial capacity.

### **Land Use and Building Preservation**

Conceptual Design B adopts a strategic approach by centralizing and elevating our school campus facilities, preserving vital green spaces and community ball fields. This design proposes the construction of a new cafeteria with an additional second floor dedicated to state-of-the-art classrooms tailored specifically for STEM and special education needs. This not only addresses current inadequacies but also strategically positions us for future educational demands. This development focuses our school campus inward and upward, rather than outward, preventing unnecessary sprawl.

By replacing the severely inadequate cafetorium with a proper auditorium leveraging retractable stage seating, which will double as flexible space during the school day, we can provide our middle school's renowned music and performing arts programs with the respect and resources they deserve.

In stark contrast, Conceptual Design E proposes a sprawling campus layout that would irreversibly consume our limited and valuable community resources. The expansion called for in Design E would result in the loss of established green spaces, which are not merely aesthetic assets but functional spaces crucial for school and community activities. Additional construction for buildings, bus drop-offs, and parking under Design E would not only strip our community of these cherished spaces but could also necessitate off-campus busing for basic activities. This would lead to logistical challenges and disconnect our school environment from its immediate community roots, affecting daily operations and community engagement. We should be going out of our way to preserve that space for future generations, instead of destroying it based on the false belief that new is always better.

The planned upward and inward expansion in Conceptual Design B cleverly utilizes our existing footprint, enhancing our facilities without encroaching further into our green spaces. This approach not only maintains the ecological and recreational value of our campus but also reinforces a sense of community and accessibility. It embodies a vision where growth and development are balanced thoughtfully with sustainability and preservation, ensuring that our educational facilities can expand in capability without sacrificing the quality of our children's educational and social environment.

This consolidation strategy supports not just an efficient use of space but also promotes a more cohesive educational experience. By keeping our educational facilities centrally located and interconnected, we foster a campus that is more secure, more accessible, and better suited to facilitate a holistic educational environment where students of all ages can thrive.

### **Cost Efficiency and Resource Utilization**

Option B emphasizes cost efficiency by maximizing the use of existing structures. By renovating and upgrading our current facilities, we avoid the substantial costs associated with new construction. This approach not only reduces the immediate financial burden but also extends the lifespan of our existing investments. For example, approximately 58,000 square feet of new space was built in 1994 for the middle and elementary schools, and a 9,000 square foot addition was built in 2004 for the elementary school. These additions are still within their expected lifespan and were built with quality materials and good workmanship. We should be good stewards of these investments.

### **Environmental and Operational Savings**

The environmental impact of new construction is dramatically higher than that of renovations. Conceptual Design B's renovation approach dramatically reduces the carbon footprint compared to new builds. By choosing to renovate and repurpose our existing structures, we embody the principles of "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" and teach our children a valuable lesson in sustainability. This approach also leads to operational savings, as energy-efficient upgrades and modern HVAC systems reduce utility costs over time.

### **Avoiding Hidden Costs and Financial Pitfalls**

Option E's sprawling campus layout would necessitate additional land use, extensive new infrastructure, and potential off-campus transportation for basic after-school activities, all of which add hidden costs to the project. Handing the 1938 building back to the town will also incur significant costs, which are not accounted for in Option E's current cost estimates. Additionally, the duplication of resources required to staff two separate school buildings under Option E would lead to increased administrative, custodial, and support staff costs, further straining the school district's budget. These expenses would strain the school's operational budget.

### **Community Financial Preferences and Survey Data**

Our survey data indicates that the community is more willing to support a tax increase in the range of 5% to 10%, which aligns with the financial impact of Option B. In contrast, the higher tax impact of Option E has very little chance of winning a majority of votes on the November ballot. By choosing Option B, we align with the community's financial preferences and ensure that our investments are both responsible and feasible.

### **Student Improvement**

Option B is designed with the student experience at its core. By addressing the critical needs of all three schools—elementary, middle, and high school—Option B ensures that every student benefits from improved and safer facilities. The new classrooms for STEM, special education, and guidance counseling will provide modern, flexible learning environments that cater to

diverse educational needs. Enhanced facilities, such as the new performing arts auditorium and the new cafeteria, will significantly improve the daily experience for students, fostering a more engaging and supportive educational environment.

By centralizing facilities and creating shared spaces, Option B promotes a sense of unity and collaboration among students across different age groups. This holistic approach not only supports academic excellence but also encourages social and emotional development by providing spaces where students can interact, collaborate, and engage in a variety of activities.

### **Environmental Impact**

We must not ignore our environmental responsibilities. The environmental cost of new construction is dramatically higher than that of renovations. Conceptual Design B's renovation approach dramatically reduces the carbon footprint compared to new builds.

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 new energy-efficient buildings to overcome the negative climate change impacts created by their construction.

Let's not forget the value of "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." By choosing to renovate and repurpose our existing structures, we are embodying these principles and teaching our children a valuable lesson: new is not always better. In a throwaway culture, we have the opportunity to buck the trend and demonstrate that true long-term

### **Adapting to Educational Changes in the AI Era**

As we stand on the brink of a technological revolution, driven by the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI), it is imperative that we approach our educational infrastructure with a conservative yet adaptable mindset. While it's tempting to envision grand, futuristic learning spaces, we must remain pragmatic in the face of an uncertain future.

Research has shown that much of the improvement in students' education can be achieved through the implementation of better, more flexible furniture. The World Economic Forum's 2020 report on the future of education emphasizes the critical role of adaptable and modular furniture in creating dynamic learning environments capable of accommodating diverse teaching styles and student needs. Investing in flexible furniture, the report suggests, is a cost-effective way to enhance students' educational experiences without overcommitting resources to fixed infrastructure.

Conceptual Design B embraces this philosophy, prioritizing adaptability in educational spaces without tying up valuable resources in a model that may quickly become obsolete. By focusing on flexibility, we ensure that our school infrastructure can evolve alongside the rapid changes in technology and educational practices.

## **Disruption and Mitigation**

Option B has been represented as 100% student disruption. What does that mean? It means there will be a 12-month period where half of students will be in portable classrooms, and a subsequent 12-month period where the other half will be in portable classrooms. With careful planning, we will minimize impact on students and staff. Modern portable classrooms have evolved significantly since when we were children. All units will include air conditioning and comfortable heating, bathrooms, modern layouts, and ample natural light. This approach ensures that while there is temporary disruption, the educational environment remains conducive to learning and development.

In contrast, Option E results in perpetual disruption. This option would permanently remove approximately one acre of heavily used ball fields from the campus. The elementary school would continue to be undersized, negatively impacting learning environments and special programs. Substandard facilities such as the cafeterium, the old kitchen, and the undersized nurses' office would remain. None of the logistical problems currently facing elementary students would be addressed. Additionally, the reduced gymnasium size would limit opportunities for physical education, sports teams, and community events. The high school is likely to remain in poor condition, risking costly emergency repairs. Furthermore, the resource duplication required by splitting the schools apart has not been factored into cost estimates, leading to increased administrative and operational inefficiencies.

## **A Challenge to Leadership and the Community**

To those who strongly favor Conceptual Design E, I want to acknowledge and validate your aspirations for our school district. Your commitment to providing our students with the best possible facilities is admirable and speaks to your dedication to their future success. I understand that you envision a transformative educational experience that a brand new, state-of-the-art school could provide.

However, I respectfully ask all of us to consider the risks of an all-or-nothing uncompromising approach that is only supported by the wealthiest and youngest demographics in town, and one that has a near zero probability of referendum success based on our survey data. If we fail to find common ground, we risk leaving our schools without any improvements at all, which would be a terrible disservice to our students and our community.

As leaders and community members, we must carefully weigh the broader implications of our decisions. While Option E represents an exciting ideal, we must also consider the practical realities of our community's financial constraints and the importance of building consensus. Option B offers a path forward that makes significant, long-term improvements to our schools while respecting the concerns of a majority of our voters.

I empathize with the desire for the most ambitious solutions, but I also believe that progress is often made through compromise and incremental change. By supporting a practical, achievable

project like Option B, we can lay the foundation for future growth and improvement while still making a meaningful difference in the lives of our students today.

The stakes are high, and the challenges are complex. But I have faith that by listening to one another, respecting our differences, and focusing on our shared commitment to our children's education, we can find a path forward together. It may not be the perfect solution, but it can be a significant step in the right direction – one that unites our community behind a common goal and demonstrates our collective resolve to invest in our schools and our future.

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