

PORTLAND BOARD OF EDUCATION
Special Joint Meeting with the
BOARD OF SELECTMEN
November 12, 2024 AT 6:00 PM

BOE Present: Laurel Steinhauser, Tim Lavoy, Meg Scata, David Murphy, Kim Nagy-Maruschock,
Sarah Spear, Angela Hammond

BOE Absent: None

BOS Present: First Selectman Ryan Curley, John Dillon, Michael Hernandez, Robert Hetrick, Shaun Manning, Michael
Pelton, James Tripp

BOS Absent: None

Others Present: Superintendent of Schools Dr. Charles Britton

1. First Selectman Ryan Curley called the special joint meeting to order at 6:04 p.m.

2. Referendum Breakdown & School Facilities Discussion

First Selectman Mr. Curley reported that the recent vote on the proposed school consolidation plan resulted in an overwhelming rejection, with 60% voting “no” and 40% voting “yes”. As a result, the consolidation plan is no longer viable and will not be a consideration in the future. Today’s meeting is focused on determining the next steps.

Both Boards are committed to working together to develop a new plan – one that resonates with the community, aligns with the needs of the students, and addresses the aging school facilities. The voter response indicates that the proposed \$33 million plan was viewed as too costly. Moving forward, a more affordable option is necessary.

The Boards are considering a Capital Improvement plan as the next step. Additionally, the secondary school will need to be addressed. Over the past three years, a significant amount of data has been gathered, providing a clear understanding of the schools’ needs.

Mr. Curley also noted that, of the approximately 6,000 voters, 223 left the consolidation question blank. In response to this outcome, the Board of Selectmen will propose a resolution to establish a Capital Improvement Committee at their next meeting. The goal is for this committee to begin meeting as soon as December. The ultimate aim is to develop a new plan and have it ready to present to voters as part of the budget referendum in May 2025.

Finally, the possibility of decommissioning the elementary school will be considered, with careful attention to ensuring that such a move does not negatively impact the quality of education.

BOE Chairperson Ms. Steinhauser took a moment to acknowledge the teachers, parents and community members who have raised awareness about the urgent needs of the school facilities. While the proposed plan did not receive support, she emphasized that the need for improvements is still critical.

The BOE remains fully committed to ensuring that our school facilities are safe, healthy, and conducive to learning. Ms. Steinhauser expressed the Board’s determination to develop a new plan with strong community backing. Both the BOS and the BOE are dedicated to working collaboratively, engaging the community throughout the process. She also voiced her support for forming a committee specifically focused on addressing the facilities issues, to help guide the next steps in a way that reflects both the needs of the schools and the input of the community.

Board of Selectmen remarks:

Mr. Pelton expressed his gratitude to the community for their passionate engagement and encouraged everyone to maintain that energy, particularly as it pertains to addressing the needs of the school facilities. He emphasized that both Boards must be clear, transparent, and focused on presenting the facts. He stated that we owe it to our children to ensure that our school system is the best it can be.

Mr. Hernandez expressed the need for a clear, realistic figure that reflects what the town is willing to invest in the school facilities. He highlighted two key factors to consider: the timeline and the length of the bond, noting that a 30-year bond was not the best option. Instead, he suggested exploring a 20-year bond as a more feasible solution.

He emphasized that the community needs to see concrete, transparent numbers regarding the cost of the project. Additionally, Mr. Hernandez proposed that the committee work toward developing a plan that would result in a net-zero tax increase, ensuring that the financial burden on taxpayers remains manageable.

Mr. Tripp emphasized the importance of approaching the issue as a two-part equation: balancing capital expenditures with operational savings. He pointed out that, as stewards of taxpayer money, the Boards have a responsibility to operate schools more efficiently. Operating three elementary schools may not be the most cost-effective model, and we need to focus on managing the costs within our control. He highlighted the need to carefully consider the number of students in each classroom and ensure that the district can afford enough teachers to maintain a reasonable student-to-teacher ratio. Additionally, Mr. Tripp suggested that the Boards explore the possibility of consolidating schools to some degree, looking at ways to reconfigure school structures to maximize savings. He also recommended a thorough evaluation of current standards and strategies for both reconfiguring the schools and achieving greater cost-effectiveness from a capital perspective. Finally, he stressed the importance of being mindful of the project timeline and the critical needs of the school buildings that must be addressed as part of this process.

Mr. Dillon emphasized the urgency of having the committee present a plan sooner rather than later, stating that the issue has already been thoroughly studied. There is a lot of great information out there, he noted, referencing the comprehensive committee report from the facility study, which included focus groups, due diligence with the state, the site lines report, and the Friar report. He expressed the belief that it is widely understood that a town of this size cannot afford to maintain all of its existing school buildings. Therefore, he stressed the need to identify a solution that is both financially palatable for taxpayers and adequate for the educational needs of the students.

Mr. Manning agreed on the need for safe and effective spaces to educate the children. He expressed his opposition to a 30-year bond, especially one that did not factor in the additional cost for the secondary schools. He stated we now need to focus on what's necessary and come up with a number we can realistically work with, while also realizing the importance of approaching the issue from a logical data-driven perspective, rather than one clouded by emotion. He recommended evaluating the costs of maintaining or closing Gildersleeve, Valley View, and Brownstone schools to determine which would be the most expensive to close. Once that assessment is complete, the next step would be to calculate the required investment for the remaining two schools and present that figure to voters in May. Additionally, he expressed his support for moving the 6th grade to the middle school.

Mr. Hetrick agreed that the taxpayers have clearly expressed their preference, and that the best option moving forward is to consolidate a school. He emphasized that this approach would result in significant savings each year. He stated the need to stop delaying and take action now to prevent wasting more money.

Board of Education remarks:

Ms. Scata emphasized that the decision ultimately rests on what the town wants. She noted that there are still unresolved questions regarding the process, the cost, and the information available to the community. While she expressed concerns about the Capital Improvement Plan, she also urged the committee to come together and develop a viable solution, with a strong focus on ensuring school safety and providing a healthy learning environment. She recommended that the committee consider engaging a facilitator from CABE, who has experience working with districts on similar issues. Ms. Scata stressed the importance of having a thorough, well-planned dialog with voters, parents and the community to develop a comprehensive and effective plan. She also voiced her concerns about the potential cost of repairs, fearing that they may fall short of addressing the long-term needs of the school.

Ms. Nagy-Maruschock stated that the primary focus should be on what is best for the students, while acknowledging the financial considerations are a significant factor. She expressed hope that the negativity surrounding the issue would subside, and that the community could unite to develop a plan that is acceptable to all, keeping the ultimate needs of students at the forefront.

Ms. Hammond agreed that the community has clearly voiced its opinion. She expressed strong support for the idea of a committee, suggesting that it should be made up of a balanced group of stakeholders, including parents, teachers, board members, and community members, to ensure diverse perspectives. She also recommended

hosting focus groups as part of the process. Addressing concerns about the previous proposal for a larger school, Ms. Hammond noted that the location of the proposed site, which was in a neighborhood, had raised concerns about traffic. She urged that such considerations be kept in mind for any future plans. Additionally, she inquired about the availability of any grant money that might help support the initiative. She reiterated the importance of keeping the children's best interest at heart, while setting aside personal egos in the decision-making process.

Ms. Spear expressed appreciation for the community's clear feedback, noting that it has provided valuable insight into their priorities. She shared her hope that the community can now come together to determine the next steps, and she looks forward to the formation of the proposed committee. Acknowledging the aggressive timeline, Ms. Spear emphasized that it is nonetheless critical to moving forward. She encouraged the committee to explore consolidation options and suggested that the committee members actively seek out available grants to support the process. Finally, she urged the community to continue engaging in the process by attending meetings and sharing their perspectives.

Mr. Murphy acknowledged that the issue has been deferred for too long, pointing out that it has been five years since the site line plans were completed. He expressed hope that the proposed timeline for a May referendum would be followed. To better understand what the community might support, he suggested conducting a survey to gauge what type of plan would be most likely to pass.

Mr. Lavoy expressed his support for the committee, calling it a crucial step for the community to focus on what is best for the student. He noted that the feedback from the BOS had been very constructive. Mr. Lavoy emphasized that the committee's goal should be to reduce the number of facilities, which would generate overhead savings, and to align this process with the Capital Improvement Plan to address future needs.

Mr. Curley invited Dr. Britton, Superintendent, to share his thoughts:

Dr. Britton agreed that the proposed committee makes logical sense as the next step in the process. He believes that meeting the May referendum deadline is achievable, noting that much of the necessary information is already available and simply requires updating with current numbers. He reassured the group that all potential options have been thoroughly reviewed, explored, and vetted. Dr. Britton also mentioned that he has consulted with Friar, who has been instrumental in helping to understand the costs and reimbursement rates. Friar has expressed their willingness to support the committee's efforts moving forward.

3. Discussion: Next Steps

Mr. Curley confirmed that there is unanimous agreement on both Boards that the next step is to establish a Capital Improvement Committee.

4. Public Comment

Ben Srb, West Cotton Hill Rd – He thanked Ryan and the BOS for all the work done to date, noting that it was a wise decision to put the proposal to a vote. He also expressed gratitude to the BOE and Dr. Britton for their efforts, and he is pleased to hear that everyone is committed to working together for the best outcome for the children. He believes it is feasible to close Valley View at the end of the year, and proposes renovating the other schools. He then discussed costs details and potential cost-savings options.

Sue McDougall, Prospect St – Speaking both as an individual and a representative of the CEA union – She shared that the teachers supported the previous plan. She expressed her deep disappointment with the negative comments about teachers online. She emphasized that the physical condition of the buildings is the most pressing issue and needs to be addressed. It's important to consider the student and minimize transitions between schools as much as possible. She also stated that there are numerous benefits of moving 6th grade to the middle school. Teachers are in full support of any viable plan moving forward.

Beth Anderson, West Cotton Hill Dr. – She thanked everyone for their efforts and reminded the group that it's crucial to continue supporting teachers. She inquired about the ongoing issues with leaks and HVAC systems in the schools, asking why these haven't been addressed. She also asked about the status of grant funding and where Portland currently stands on that. She shared her concerns about adding grades to Valley View and expressed her

desire to be involved in the process moving forward to ensure the best outcomes for the schools, teachers, and the community.

Mitch Gilbert, Cox Rd. – He advised against allowing opinion to get in the way of facts. He reiterated his concerns that, with the current option, the referendum question likely struggled to pass due to the challenges posed by the presidential election and the economic hardships voters were facing. He noted that very few people were able to explain the issues in depth, and even fewer could present both sides effectively. He cautioned about how questions would be framed in surveys going forward, suggesting that there should be opportunities for proponents to argue the opposing side, and vice versa, to ensure a balanced discussion.

Stephanie Tatro, Great Hill Rd. - Thanked everyone for their hard work since 2021. She suggested moving forward with the formation of another committee and a new plan to be put to referendum. She recommended considering the establishment of a capital improvement fund. If a school is decommissioned, she emphasized the need for a clear plan for the building to avoid paying for an empty space over an extended period. She also stressed the importance of providing community spaces for residents and highlighted the need to address teacher compensation. She urged finding ways to increase teacher pay in order to retain the high-quality educators we currently have and ensure better funding for education overall.

Don Gouin, South Rd. – Expressed his surprise at the recent newspaper coverage stating that the overall Portland population did not support the consolidation. He believes it's essential to provide the public with accurate information. Reflecting on his own experience, he noted that when he graduated from PHS in 1957, there were 62 seniors and only two schools in the district. This year, the graduating class had 72 students, yet there are now five schools. He argued that consolidating schools is the logical approach. Based on reports he has reviewed, consolidation would be the most economical solution. He emphasized the need for clearer, more concise information to enable voters to make an informed decision.

Brett Hertzog Betkoski, 5 Victoria Rd. – Thanked everyone for their hard work. He expressed hope for more intentional communication from the Board of Selectman moving forward, and felt that the communication received so far had come too late. He emphasized the need for better messaging in the future, with a focus on providing more factual information.

Darcy Parmelee, Foley Rd. – Mentioned that discussions on Facebook became negative and divisive. She expressed hope that moving forward, careful consideration will be given to the impact of students if one school is closed, particularly ensuring that the remaining schools provide a safe space for all students. She also stated that she does not support moving 6th grade to the middle school and would prefer the students stay at Brownstone for another year for consistency. She acknowledged that the situation is challenging for both staff and students and hopes this concern will be addressed going forward.

Mr. Curley thanked everyone - teachers, parents, and residents – acknowledging that it's been made clear over the past few months how much we care about Portland. While we may not always agree, it's evident that everyone shares the goal of doing what's best for Portland students, while also being mindful of the taxpayers. He also thanked the BOE and the BOS for their time and efforts. Mr. Curley emphasized that, despite differing views, we can all agree on one thing: we want what's best for Portland.

Ms. Scata thanked Mr. Curley for his dedication to both the students and taxpayers. She expressed her eagerness to work together toward a positive resolution that benefits everyone.

5. Adjourn

S. Manning moved to adjourn the meeting at 7:03 p.m., seconded by J. Tripp. Unanimously approved. MOTION CARRIED.

Respectfully submitted,
Tricia Dean
Executive Assistant to the Superintendent/Board Clerk