



A Path Forward for Burlington High School



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courageous people. Join the journey!



TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER FROM BURLINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT TO

THE HONORABLE MAYOR WEINBERGER..... 3

Q1. CLEAR ARTICULATION OF WHY YOU ARE PROPOSING TO MOVE FORWARD WITH THE PROPOSED PLAN AS OPPOSED TO ALTERNATIVES 3

Q2. DETAILED EXPLANATION OF HOW THE PROPOSED PLAN WILL IMPROVE THE EDUCATION OF OUR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS 4

 A. Collaborative and Welcoming Learning Environment 5

 B. Safety and Security 6

Q3. CLEAR AND CONFIDENT PRESENTATION OF THE TAX IMPACT..... 6

Q4. UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THE STATEWIDE FINANCING SYSTEM IMPACTS THE PROPOSED PROJECT AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF UNCERTAINTY AMIDST A PERIOD OF POLICY REFORM. 7

Q5. PLAN FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT..... 8

Q6. PLAN FOR MANAGING PROJECT..... 9

Q7. CONFIDENCE IN TOTAL PROJECT COSTS 9

Q8. OTHER FUNDING MECHANISMS..... 10

Closing and Acknowledgment of Memorandum of Agreement Conversations.....10

TABLE OF ATTACHMENTS

Attachment ABHS EMG Facilities Condition Assessment

Attachment BBSD 2016 Facilities Master Plan - Interim Report 8.01.16

Attachment C.....NEASC Letter

Attachment DMargolis Healy Safety & Security Assessment

Attachment E..... Borrowing Assumptions

Attachment F..... Project Partners

Attachment G.....Complete Budget Cost Breakdown



The Honorable Mayor Weinberger,

Thank you for taking the time to raise thoughtful questions and concerns regarding Burlington School District's proposed path forward for our City's new flagship educational facility. Is it clear that you want what is best for our students, families, and our community, and we are grateful for your time and consideration of this project.

To that end, in advance of the District's presentation to City Council on Monday, August 27th, I wanted to personally respond to each of the questions raised in your August 21st letter to the District.

After the August 27th City Council meeting, we look forward to continuing our discussions with the City.

Q1. *Clear articulation of why you are proposing to move forward with the proposed plan as opposed to alternatives.* *We are looking to understand the options that the BSD considered and why you have selected the current approach. In particular, we would like to understand how the current proposal has been informed by the consultant recommendations that were produced a few years ago, in part with City resources.*

Answer: Conversations and plans for a new Burlington High School (BHS) have been in the works for decades, including a proposal for the school as part of a larger \$229 million complete capital plan that was rejected by the City Council to be put on the ballot in November 2008. After the District's leadership transitions between 2013-2015, the current BSD administration picked up these conversations and has been working diligently to deliver the learning space that our students need and our community can be proud of.

In 2013, we awarded an RFP to Black River Design with the understanding that they would recommend the best option based on community feedback and feasibility, and present us a path forward with preliminary design work and detailed cost estimates based on schematic designs.

We continued to work with parents, students, consultants, teachers, and staff to think seriously about the needs at BHS. We held input sessions and collected design directives based on stakeholder feedback. We looked at multiple options ranging from addressing the bare minimum existing deferred maintenance needs, at a cost of \$30 million (See Attachment A), to constructing a new facility for \$100 million or more, and multiple options in between.

Ultimately, three options for the high school rose to the top:

- 1) Address deferred maintenance only (not accessibility or classroom space sizes): \$30 million
- 2) Partial demolition, expansion, and renovation (the current plan): \$60-\$70 million
- 3) Total demolition and brand new building: \$90-\$100 million

All options were carefully examined to see which would best meet the needs of the District and City, based, in part, on the recommendations of the capital needs consultant the City helped finance, in which the consultants noted that:

"Burlington High School (BHS) has sufficient space to accommodate projected educational programming. One important finding, however, is that over half of BHS classrooms lack sufficient size to accommodate the maximum number of students allowed by policy or program.

This raises the need to possibly look at reconfiguring some of the spaces to allow for maximum classroom sizing.” (See Attachment B.)

That same needs assessment, however, prompted the District to temporarily pause plans for the high school and create a 10 Year Capital Plan for the deferred maintenance and space constraints at our other schools.

In 2017, the plans for a new or redeveloped high school were picked back up by the current administration, who created a community-led BHS ReEnvisioning Committee consisting of parents, District staff, and community members, to carry the work. The ReEnvisioning Committee studied the original plans thoroughly, vetted and updated them, and conducted extensive outreach to gain community input on these three options. *They received overwhelming response supporting the renovation option.*

Once our Board of School Commissioners approved this path in April of 2018, we drilled deeper into the specific cost options associated with a renovation, expansion, and demolition. Three cost options and their associated strengths and weakness were carefully reviewed and presented to the BSD board and community. These options were:

1. \$60 Million: Option includes using least expensive building materials available, full ADA accessibility, minimal work to heating and insulation systems, no air cooling, and limited amount of renovations at Burlington Technical Center (BTC). The plan would be modeled on Collaborative High Performance Schools standards (CHPS) but would not include certification, and would only have a new fit-up budget only for new spaces.
2. \$65 Million: Option includes using more durable, longer- lasting materials. Renovations to BTC are still limited and does not allow for air cooling in classroom. Project meets basic CHPS requirements for certification and allows for better heating and insulation.
3. \$68.5 Million: Option includes using highest quality materials with complete renovations to BTC building. Also allows for some salvaging of demolished buildings, significant heating, and cooling upgrades, and results in a higher CHPS certification.

On August 21, the Board resolved to ask City Council to place a \$70 million bond question on the ballot, representing support for the \$68.5 million plan, with additional resources for air conditioning and construction contingencies. It should be noted that though this plan increases the square footage of the building, it maintains the current number of classrooms, reconfiguring and/or enlarging classrooms to current standards and provide better flexible learning spaces, as was recommended in the capital needs consultant’s study referenced above.

On another note, a few councilors and other community members have brought up that fact that in 2012 a citizen developed idea to build a brand new school on the City-owned, North 40 waterfront property was presented to the district and council. This citizen developed proposal did not garner any traction from the Mayor or Council and hasn’t been revisited or discussed by the City and/or District since.

2. Detailed explanation of how the proposed plan will improve the education of our high school students. *The ADA and energy benefits of a renovated high school have long been clear. My understanding is that there are strategies for significantly addressing these issues with considerably less investment than currently is being proposed. We appreciate that recent materials developed by BSD have attempted to address the other benefits of the current, larger plan. We will be looking for you to further detail and explain these benefits.*

Answer: The District has analyzed an approach to rectify ADA accessibility and deferred maintenance violations without a full campus redevelopment, and this work would cost approximately \$50 million to implement within the current building footprint and layout. This would address ADA and deferred maintenance issues which the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on

Public Schools has identified as a potential problem for the Standard for Accreditation on School Resources for Learning. (See Attachment C, we are required to submit an update on the long-range master facilities plan for the deferred maintenance and handicapped accessibility to NEASC by October 1st). This \$50 million plan, however, would not deliver to our community the kind of educational facility that responds to this and future generations' educational needs. Moreover, this limited project does not allow the District to comply fully with federal safety and security grants that are available to protect our children. I would like to address the merits of this plan based on its improvements to both improved learning spaces and safety and security.

A. Collaborative and Welcoming Learning Environment

The overarching value of the proposed redevelopment is the creation of an educational environment that aligns with the District's commitment to equitable resources and learning opportunities for all students - an environment that says "all children can learn and all of our children matter."

The current campus design was modeled after college campuses and is not suitable for current or future secondary school learners. The BHS campus has five segregated structures in which specific educational content is delivered in different wings. For example, all science instruction, labs, and science teacher offices are in the E building, and all world language subject matter and teacher offices are in B building. And, unfortunately, all English language learners are building their language skills in a area separate from all of these classes.

Segregated learning reinforces the concept that teachers teach content, rather than the holistic concept that teachers teach students. Most importantly, recent educational standards and regulations have transitioned to a personalized learning approach that develops and evaluates student proficiencies based on their ability, rather than a traditional, rigid schedule. We are preparing students for a new world; the education "factory model" of doing 45 minutes of math, closing your book and then going to another room to do 45 minutes of social studies is obsolete.

Vermont's Act 77 requires school districts to transition to Proficiency Based Learning (PBL) on a timeline that is unrealistic for Burlington given the high school building's substandard design. PBL requires extensive teacher planning and collaboration time and interaction, which is severely hindered by our current physical environment. Moreover, PBL requires that students have access to multiple, non-traditional learning approaches that require flexible space and ease of building access as upper grade students will likely participate in more community-based learning opportunities in the future.

To reinforce our belief that "all children can learn and all children matter," we need a building that eases the transition for middle school students into high school. Leaving their learning environments where they have been comfortable and supported and coming to a campus with triple the number of students is intimidating. Students can easily feel lost as they travel from wing to wing, to the basement for music instruction, and back up to a class in a wing with the highest elevation (the equivalent of 7 stories of elevation change and much distance).

Our freshmen have up to seven different teachers who often do not have the opportunity to even set eyes on each other in the course of a work week. The proposed renovations dedicate instructional space for ninth-grade academies where teachers will deliver content and educational support across all subjects. In the new space, world language, mathematics, science, English and social studies teachers can meet as teams to support students on a daily basis. This conforms with VT Department of Educational Standards around PBL, which requires personalized learning plans to be developed collaboratively between students and all of their teachers.

Collaboration, communication, and teamwork are required to develop the creative, courageous and caring people that Burlington wants to be recognized for. The newly renovated high school will:

- Feature updated science labs dispersed throughout the campus

- Be better able to incorporate future technology advancements
- Include flexible learning spaces throughout to accommodate learning in small, medium and large groups
- Offer a centralized layout that fosters transdisciplinary collaborations between teachers and students
- Meet the ever-changing needs of technology and learning styles and abilities
- Provide for true inclusion for differently-abled students who are often scheduled into courses based on physical limitations instead of desired subject matter
- Be the first certified Collaborative for High Performance Schools (CHPS) school in Vermont, recognizing that kids and adults have better cognitive functionality “in schools with good lighting, clean air, and comfortable classrooms”
- Offer natural light and usable outdoor classroom space
- Provide shared workspace among professional faculty to work together, to share ideas and engage in ongoing professional conversation required to comply with Act 77 and reinforce the message that all of our children matter

In short, the newly renovated high school will help the achievement of students through the creation of a collaborative and welcoming learning environment.

B. Safety and Security

A 2015 Safety and Security Program Assessment from Margolis Healy shows that BHS’ security puts students and staff at risk (Attachment D). Our current structure:

- Features multiple access points
- Encourages students to walk OUTSIDE to get to classes quicker
- Includes vulnerable areas (breezeways and outdoor gathering spaces) where our students and staff are easily seen from the front lawn

As one retired Burlington Police Officer notes:

“In terms of school safety and security, the physical layout of the BHS campus made it very difficult to patrol the exterior of the buildings for potential breaking and enterings during non school hours. There were way too many points of entry (exterior doors) potentially allowing entry by unauthorized persons during the school day. The wooded areas in close proximity to the building (s) also presented an area of concern of affording potential school shooters a place to hide from view.” -Bill Laware

The proposed design facilitates safety and security by:

- Creating centralized access for both High School and BTC students
- Offering outdoor learning and gathering spaces in a protected and enclosed courtyard setting
- Consolidating learning spaces and eliminating the need to travel outside between classes
- Bringing the building up to date with safety protocols (such as lockdowns and hold and secure) and emergency procedures.

In addition to creating a collaborative and welcoming learning environment and addressing our substantial accessibility concerns, *the proposed design of this school is a major improvement in the safety and security of our students.*

3. Clear and confident presentation of the tax impact. *Taxpayers need to understand the dollar figure by which their property tax bills will change if the voters approve a high school bond. The slides that were produced for last week’s school board discussion are helpful – we are hoping to receive some additional explanation of how these numbers were derived and how certain you are about the accuracy of these figures. Further, we would like to understand whether any of the BSD’s \$19 million of voter-approved bonding authority will be utilized for this project or will be funded entirely by new bonding (our understanding is that the \$19 million figure included some allocation for deferred maintenance at BHS).*

Answer: As a former employee of the Vermont Legislative Joint Fiscal Office, the District's executive director of finance has a high degree of familiarity and comfort with the Vermont State Education Tax formula codified in Act 68. Burlington is fortunate to have his expertise and fluency with the education formula, and his budget and commensurate tax impact projections have always been sound.

The education formula returns education funding based on the proportion of citizens who are income sensitized versus those who are not. Burlington residents are more income sensitized than not, resulting in BSD being viewed as what is called a "receiving district," meaning the school district often receives more funding than our residents pay into the fund.

The District has calculated the tax impact on individuals that pay education taxes on the basis of both property and income. Those tax impact numbers are available on the BHS ReEnvisioning website and in Attachment E. These estimates are the result of the statutorily-defined education tax formula and the value of contributing variables as they stand today. The variables involved in the education tax formula include:

- Burlington's general education spending proposed to voters annually
- Burlington's number of equalized pupils
- the dollar yield calculated annually by the Agency of Education and Legislature
- the degree to which Burlington is at or below the Common Level of Appraisal

Education Spending, or our annual general education budget, is the only variable that will be directly impacted by the BHS project once the City begins drawing down the bond debt; all other variables are held constant at FY19 levels in order to illustrate the tax impact of bond disbursements. All three of the other variables can change in a direction that increases or decreases the actual tax rate, but these changes cannot be reliably predicted.

Borrowing costs are based on bonding occurring at a 4% interest rate for a term of 30 years, as reported on our website. These assumptions were made on the advice of the City of Burlington's Director of Financial Operations, Rich Goodwin.

The tax impact charts show that we conservatively assume that the project will be funded entirely by new bonding. Of our 10-year, \$39 million capital plan, \$19 million of which was approved by vote in 2017, we estimated that \$1.7 million would be needed for maintenance and emergency repairs at BHS prior to the bonding and completion of the proposed major renovations. However, if any amount of this \$1.7 million is not required to keep BHS in a safely operable condition and are also not required to address any other deferred maintenance needs across the District, it is possible that such funds could be rolled into this project, thereby minimally reducing the amount we would ultimately need to borrow to complete the BHS project.

4. Understanding of how the statewide financing system impacts the proposed project and the implications of uncertainty amidst a period of policy reform. *In connection with #3, we are looking to the BSD to explain how the statewide education financing system either mitigates or increases the potential costs borne by Burlington taxpayers. Further, given our awareness that the statewide funding system is undergoing a period of debate and reform that likely will continue in the upcoming legislative session, we are looking to understand from the BSD whether that debate may have any clear implications on this project and whether the Agency of Education has been engaged in the proposed project in any way.*

Answer: Because Vermont operates a statewide education funding system, the state Education Fund faces increased spending anytime a school district increases its spending. And, because capital spending and bond debt are included in the statewide education tax formula, the BHS project will increase the statewide education budget. As discussed in the previous question, the education funding formula will return proportionally more statewide education revenues to Burlington than Burlington

taxpayers deliver to the statewide education fund. Burlington tax-payers are responsible for absorbing the cost of being 20% below the Common Level of Appraisal until returning to 100%, but capital costs of all school districts are paid by all statewide education funds.

The statewide funding system in Vermont remains the subject of vigorous debate by state policymakers. To date, no clear consensus has developed around how to change the system, so it is currently infeasible to predict how a redesigned system could impact tax rates. However, Act 68 was a Supreme Court Decision and there has been no indication to date that the Agency of Education is willing or has the capacity to undertake the analytics required to adjust the formula in a direction that would result in a less equitable outcome for all Vermont students.

Each year for the past few years, Burlington school commissioners have requested that state legislators introduce language that revives state support for school construction. There has been a moratorium on this program for the past decade. If such legislation came to pass, it could reduce the impact on education taxes by shifting some of the burden of school construction costs to the state's capital budget. This idea has been periodically discussed by legislators, without success, so it would be unwise to rely on the possibility of state support for school construction. The District will monitor legislative efforts in this area to ensure that the BHS project would receive state school construction support, should this opportunity be reinstated.

5. Plan for public engagement. *Our community is comprised of dedicated and passionate residents who expect to be brought into major decisions around the future of our public assets and school system. Burlingtonians want to make thoughtful and informed decisions at the ballot box, and community buy-in will be critical before your proposed ballot question is put to voters. We would like to understand what additional public engagement, education, and advocacy efforts are planned in the lead-up to a City-wide vote.*

Answer: This project has a long history of public engagement and we plan to aggressively continue that work. Many features included in this project, such as additional physical education space, parking on a non-sloped surface, integrated classrooms, and makerspaces, have been included based on requests and suggestions from community, staff, teachers and student input sessions over the past several years. The plan we bring to City Council, and hopefully to voters, is detailed but it is only a start. If a bond passes in November, we once again begin the exciting work of engaging all of our constituents, working together to fine-tune this new learning center.

Leading up to November, we are confident in our ability to share information and engage with our community. From the time that the board voted to approve this plan in April of this year, we have worked hard to engage the community:

- Project was covered by nine different media outlets (with another four in the past week)
- District officials and volunteers shared extensively on social media and Front Porch Forum
- Led three separate, public tours of the building in July and August
- Tabled at City Market with staff, commissioners, and volunteers
- Passed out literature at the majority of the polls on August 14, 2018, Primary Day
- We answered dozens of questions through our online web forum
- Published a survey which garnered 401 responses (in just 68 hours)

This past work lays the foundation for how we are prepared to move forward over the next 10 weeks and we are confident in our ability to share information and engage with our community. We plan to launch a traditional and social *informational* public relations campaign designed to share details of the work and where, but never how, residents can vote. Components of this plan will include, but not be limited to, the following actions:

- Offer additional tours of the building

- Work to create a 3D model of the new building
- Update our brochure
- Engage our core group of supporters (ReEnvisioning Committee) to hold neighborhood-scale opportunities to learn about the project
- Hold Superintendent Chats and opportunities to meet with school commissioners
- Present at each NPA meeting
- Table at community events and gathering spaces
- Hold community forums
- Keep our website up to date with the latest information and FAQs
- Engage the business community (currently in discussions to partner with GBIC)
- Utilize our mass-messaging system to engage school district families
- Consult with City Council and City Staff on engagement suggestions

This work will be led by our in-house Communication Specialist with support from District staff, and members of the ReEnvisioning Committee, as well as our Board of School Commissioners and the Board's "Public Engagement Committee."

6. Plan for managing project. *The proposed project would be one of the largest public investments ever made in Burlington and constitutes a major development plan. Such projects require experienced project teams with specialized skills to achieve their programmatic and financial goals. We are looking to understand how the BSD intends to manage the proposed project from now until completion.*

Answer: A qualified Construction Manager (CM) will be brought in as the project moves into Design Development. CM selection will include a pre-qualification process to assure only qualified firms submit proposals. The CM will work with the architectural and engineering team to refine the project phasing plan. Once construction begins, the budget includes the services of a full-time Clerk of the Works to represent the Owner on site during the entire construction process. In addition, we have hired a Commissioning Agent who will assure that what was built is what the public paid for.

Please see "Attachment F" for a current list of project partners, as well as the post-bond consultant positions we are expecting to hire.

In addition, our Board's Finance and Facilities Committee, which meets regularly, will monitor project details and our director of finance will provide financial reports at our monthly school board meetings.

7. Confidence in total project costs *We would like to understand how the current project cost elements have been developed and what strategies the BSD plans to pursue to keep the project within budget through both the pre-development and construction periods.*

Answer: Black River Design uses a professional cost estimator who generated base estimates for each component of construction. Knowing that all details are not available for estimating at this point in the process, these base amounts include reasonable allowances for design contingencies. Additively, these result in a \$255/sf base amount, which is comparable to similar institutional projects delivered by this design team.

To estimate costs, the proposed project was divided into sub-areas representing individual floors of both new and renovation areas. In addition, separate areas for special uses were identified for functions such as gymnasiums, auditoriums, etc. Costs for each component were adjusted for each area based on the anticipated materials, quantities and complexity of construction. Items such as elevators were translated into sf costs and distributed among the areas of the building served by that equipment.

To the total projected construction cost arrived at through this process, separate estimates for site work, general conditions, and demolition were prepared. Other non-construction project costs were also itemized, including a 10% bid and construction contingency and a 4% inflation factor. These

contingencies, when combined with the allowances mentioned above, result in about a 20% total contingency.

As the design development process advances, additional detailed cost estimating will be done as the scope of work becomes more exact, following the required construction competitive bid process. Bid alternates will be included in the scope of work to ensure final bid package will stay within budget. (See Attachment G for complete budget.)

8. Other funding mechanisms. The success of bonding initiatives often depends in part on communicating to voters that all alternatives to a property tax increase have been considered and pursued. We understand that the BSD has limited alternative funding streams, yet would like to understand if the BSD has explored the potential of other funding mechanisms, such as philanthropy or grant funding opportunities, and the status of those efforts.

Answer: Alternative funding mechanisms have been examined in the past, in part with support from the City. At that time, there were limited options for significant alternatives.

However, the board is committed to discussing the possibility of federal funding with our congressional delegation for a state of the art energy efficient educational facility, particularly if our technical center meets eligibility for any federal grant sources. The Board will also engage an energy consultant and discuss financing options that use energy savings as repayment to reduce the bond obligation, even if nominally. Additionally, the Board will evaluate the climate for gifts from the community and/or local philanthropists who may be excited about naming opportunities. Finally, the project may contain non-education related expenses which the City itself may or may not choose to support.

We look forward to continuing to investigate all alternative funding sources between now and project completion and we will advance this effort with the community to engage stakeholders. However, we do believe it is best to ask for the ability to borrow for the total project cost while still committing to pursuing the above-mentioned ways to avoid borrowing all of those available funds.

Closing and Acknowledgment of Memorandum of Agreement Conversations

I hope that through answering these questions, you can see that our team has thought deeply and worked diligently to find the best path forward for the flagship educational facility for the Queen City's youth. In addition to availing ourselves for questions, myself and the school board would be interested in increasing our collaboration with the City. To that end, we look forward to continued talks with the City around the creation of an Memorandum of Agreement with the City, which would allow us to better work together towards our shared needs and the goals of this project.

We look forward to continued dialogue and critical thinking around this project and Burlington's future.

With appreciation,



Burlington School Superintendent Yaw Obeng