



## **State will accept higher enrollment numbers in funding for new school or addition Two school option is unlikely**

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Editor

**FAIRHAVEN** — Despite a declining birth rate in Fairhaven, the town was able to get the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to allow more classrooms per grade in the proposed new elementary school or addition.

Members of the School Building Committee (SBC) met with the MSBA on Nov. 1 to discuss the enrollment numbers. The committee was concerned that the MSBA's methodology forecast just 370 elementary school students for the population that now attends Rogers and Wood elementary schools. There are more than 400 students attending them now.

"The MSBA was sympathetic to our building something bigger," Christopher Bunnell, SBC chairman, said at its meeting on Nov. 4.

Many parents of elementary school children have pressed the SBC to keep Wood and Rogers as neighborhood schools and make needed renovations, but Mr. Bunnell said the MSBA was cool to that idea.

Mr. Bunnell said the MSBA won't fund renovations to both schools. He said, "They did make it clear to us that if a two-school solution is proposed, " the MSBA would only provide funding for construction or renovation of Rogers "because our statement of interest only focused on Rogers."

Mr. Bunnell said if the town wants to keep both Rogers and Wood, it will have to finance the renovations at Wood all by itself.

The MSBA will fund about 50 percent of a new school or an addition to either Rogers or Wood. It will not finance work on one school now and the other later, Mr. Bunnell said.

Asked if that means the two-school option is off the table, SBC members said it is not but stressed that the expense makes it unlikely.

The architects said the cost of duplicating gyms, cafeterias and other rooms at two schools makes it more expensive than the cost of combining the two schools into one.

Ultimately, town residents will have to approve the town's share of a new school or addition, which will be financed with a 20-year bond and added to property taxes.

According to HMFH Architects, the cost of renovations and an addition of about 52,000 square feet to Rogers would be about \$25 million. Of that, the town's share, after the MSBA funding, is about \$11.4 million.

The cost of building a new school on the Wood School site on Sconticut Neck Road is also about \$25 million if the town builds a "model" school there. That means using plans that already exist for a school the state has identified as a model school. East Fairhaven Elementary School was one of four schools the MSBA named a model school earlier this year.

If the town duplicates a model school at the Wood site, the cost would be about \$24.3 million with the town's share just over \$10 million.

Fairhaven gets bonus points either way — for preserving an historic building at Rogers or for duplicating a model school at Wood.

By comparison, the two-school option — with renovations and additions at both Rogers and Wood — would cost about \$27 million with the town's share at \$18.8 million. The larger cost is largely because the MSBA said it will only help fund the work at Rogers.

Another deterrent to the two-school option is that, if only three classrooms are needed per grade, one school would have two classrooms per grade and the other would only have one class per grade.

Mr. Bunnell said the MSBA "wants an educationally sound program." He said the MSBA said it is "a big hill to climb" if either Wood or Rogers has only one classroom per grade.

Parents raised questions about the plans HMFH Architects showed for the Rogers School site, including the need for 100 parking spaces. They also asked about the traffic impact from busing former Wood students here.

Mr. Bunnell said there will be "traffic problems" from bringing students who formerly went to one school to another.

The town's Executive Secretary Jeffrey W. Osuch, said, "You're going to have more problems with Pleasant Street than with Sconticut Neck Road."

Others said the traffic will be manageable, however.

Among the other questions asked was what will happen to the school building that is not used anymore. Mr. Osuch said the town will have to find a use for Rogers if the Wood site is chosen. The Wood School site, which is larger, was described as more suitable for other uses.

Mr. Bunnell said, "There are more options for the use of that property."

The Rogers School was built thanks to the town's benefactor, Henry Huttleston Rogers. It is in an area of Central Village that may become part of a proposed National Historic District.

Superintendent Dr. Robert N. Baldwin said they should consider if it is more cost effective to keep Rogers "and take that burden off the town."

As for what will happen during construction, Mr. Baldwin said Oxford School has been kept and maintained for just that reason.

Mr. Baldwin said his chief concern is the educational program that will be offered. He said students at all the elementary schools should be offered the same quality of education.

The SBC was on the agenda to meet with the School Committee on Wednesday, Nov. 10, after the Advocate's deadline for this week's paper. It also plans to meet with the Board of Selectmen. Mr. Bunnell said anyone may attend those meetings and that the SBC may hold another public meeting before bringing a final proposal to the state.

Despite a recent bubble in kindergartners, the birth rate has been declining in Fairhaven, Mr. Osuch said.

Mr. Osuch said the MSBA considered the declining birth rate when coming up with an enrollment of 370 students for the future Wood and Rogers school populations.

Mr. Osuch said there were 155 births in 2005 in Fairhaven, 142 in 2006, 127 in 2007, 122 in 2008 and 125 in 2009. Through August 2010, there have been only 66 births, he said.

After the meeting, Mr. Osuch said other factors affect enrollment, such as new construction and families with children moving into Fairhaven.

He said new construction "is pretty dead and has been for a few years," in Fairhaven and nationwide.

Mr. Osuch said the recession has also been cited as a factor in the declining birth rate nationwide over the last two years with some families deciding not to have children.

The Associated Press did a story that can be found on the web on how the recession has affected the birth rate.