

TOWN OF PORTLAND, CONNECTICUT  
BOARD OF SELECTMEN  
PUBLIC HEARING  
June 18, 2024

First Selectman Ryan Curley called the public hearing to order at 6:02 p.m. At this hearing, any resident or taxpayer may be heard. Ryan read the legal notice into record:

Pursuant to Section 503(a) of the Portland Town Charter, a public hearing will be held by the Board of Selectmen on **Tuesday, June 18, 2024 at 6:00 P.M.** in the Portland High School Media Center, 95 High Street, Portland, CT to obtain public comments and questions regarding a proposal to appropriate \$68,000,000 for costs related to the renovation and expansion of Valley View Elementary School into a pre-K-Grade 5 school (the "Project") and to authorize the issuance of the Town's bonds or notes in an amount not to exceed \$68,000,000 to finance the appropriation, or so much thereof as may be necessary after deducting grants to be received for the Project.

TOWN OF PORTLAND, CT  
BOARD OF SELECTMEN  
June 5, 2024

RESOLUTION RECOMMENDING AN APPROPRIATION AND BOND AUTHORIZATION FOR THE  
RENOVATION AND EXPANSION OF VALLEY VIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL INTO A PRE-K-  
GRADE 5 SCHOOL

RESOLVED, that the Board of Selectmen recommends that the Town of Portland (the "Town") appropriate \$68,000,000 for costs related to the renovation and expansion of Valley View Elementary School into a pre-K-Grade 5 school (the "Project"). The appropriation may be expended for site improvements, design, construction, renovation and installation costs, engineering and professional fees, inspection, evaluation and surveying costs, materials, equipment, furniture, purchase costs, legal fees, financing costs, interest expense on temporary borrowings, and other costs related to the Project. The appropriation shall include any federal, state or other grants-in-aid received for the Project. The Board of Selectmen or, a building committee, if established, is authorized to determine the particulars of the Project. The Board of Selectmen may reduce or modify the scope of the Project and the entire appropriation may be expended on the Project as so reduced or modified.

FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Board of Selectmen recommends that the Town finance the appropriation by issuing the Town's bonds or notes in an amount not to exceed \$68,000,000, or so much thereof as may be necessary after deducting grants to be received for the Project.

FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Board of Selectmen hereby refers the Project to the Planning and Zoning Commission for approval in accordance with Connecticut General Statutes Section 8-24.

A Special Board of Selectmen's meeting will be held later this evening at 7:30 PM for the BOS to approve a resolution to call a special town meeting and referendum vote.

Ryan opened the hearing for public input.

Susan Bransfield, 16 Covell Hill Road, said if the school is built, it would be one of the biggest schools in CT and located in one of the smallest towns. It doesn't make sense. We would be depriving the kids in this school. She then echoed some of the comments expressed by BOS members in their last meeting. She doesn't like it; she hates it. It will change the nature of our school system. She loves Portland schools, teachers and staff and they are doing a great job and she appreciates it. But this is not the best option. This is your vote tonight. We chose you to make the best solution. Let's reject the question that is full of doubt.

Ben Srb, 139 West Cotton Hill, said the reality is that it is going to cost the taxpayers about \$1 million and we don't have a plan to pay for it. At the end of the day, it will take over 30 years to pay for it. Why will we finance something for 30 years when we know it will fall apart in 20. The building was renovated about 29 years ago. He completely disagrees with it. We don't need it. The conversation ends there unless they have a way to pay for it. Hopes the BKS does the right thing.

Sue McDougall, 22 Prospect Street, said she has been a teacher in the Middle School with 32 years of experience. She is concerned about the conditions and the HVAC factor in hot weather. These older buildings were not built for the current technology. It is hard for children to transition from one school to another. She taught in three buildings and they are difficult to teach in. This plan is a step in the right direction. We are doing the best we can with the bare minimum. I implore you to bring this forward. We need to make some changes now.

Laurel Steinhauser, 56 Prospect Street, recognizes that this is the result of four years of hard work. Two excellent plans have been provided; some will agree, some will disagree with them. As a parent, she is on board 220% with this plan. We cannot afford to operate three elementary schools. We will find ourselves in a very bad situation. There are excellent benefits of a modern and healthy school. By moving this proposal forward, we acknowledge all the hard work and must allow the people to make an informed decision.

April Graves, Freestone Avenue, had a lot of concerns about having one mega school in town. She's attended town meetings and has concerns about the millions of dollars and that some of the schools are falling apart. She has concerns about some of the other plans that haven't passed a referendum yet and the need for a gym that will no longer exist. She has concerns that we may have a new and shiny school but also have another one that would be falling apart. She expressed concern that these plans haven't passed a referendum yet.

Jen Witschy, 21 Cote Lane, said she feels so strongly that we should send this to referendum. She is concerned about some inaccurate numbers circulating. She is a certified teacher and was shocked with the lack of communication among schools. She told of some good things that she experienced in other schools. She told how hot it gets in some of the school rooms with no air circulation and believes this needs to be sent to referendum.

Jen Pickett, 22 Fox Run Road, echoed the same thing. It would be good to see the kids have the same staff and not have to ferry the kids all over town to drop them off. It makes sense to the community. It makes sense for costs. The buildings are falling apart and we'll spend more money trying to fix them up.

Donna Finkelstein, 6 Joelle Drive, said the BOS members were selected to make the right decisions for the town. The reality is that taxes at this time will go way high. This is a lot of money. We're not in Glastonbury or Cromwell; we are a very small town. This will affect every family whether kids or not. You have the responsibility to do what is right for all the taxpayers. She would love to have it but not without knowing what the taxes are. She says it's too late now. The horse is already out of the barn. We all have questions. She expressed concern about those on a fixed income and that the meeting was held now while so many are not available or away on vacation. It is not necessary that we have a mega school. There's no pressure for them to decide; why not put it off for six months or so. Do what's right for all those seniors who are on a fixed income.

Dave Murphy, 40 Carousel Drive, said everyone has an opinion. For everyone who doesn't like this plan, he can find others who do. We have to do something. We will get more tax revenue from Nordic and Brainerd. The new school will be state of the art and energy-efficient; the educators want it, the parents want it. This is what works for the students. Where were the negative people for the last 4-5 years. Let the people vote and let the people decide.

Ben Srb, 139 Cotton Hill, respects what people have to say. He again went over to the numbers and how it will cost the people over \$100 million. We need to get Valley View off the list. That was the only school that was to be cut. We need to fix our other facilities. It wasn't included in the survey. If we divide the population in quarters, it will be much safer.

Ryan Curley said he received one letter in favor, and three letters in opposition. He thanked all for their comments.

Sarah Spear (BOE member) wrote: Dear First Selectman Curley and Portland's Selectmen, I am writing to confirm my support for sending the Portland Public Schools facilities bonding question to referendum in the November election. As discussed during the joint Board of Selectmen and Board of Education meeting last month, sending the question to the voters ensures we undertake the course of action that has the greatest support from voters. Please vote to recommend, "AN APPROPRIATION AND BOND AUTHORIZATION FOR THE RENOVATION AND EXPANSION OF VALLEY VIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL INTO A PRE-K-GRADE 5 SCHOOL."

Martha Peterson Swanson and Jay E. Swanson wrote: Dear Members of the Board of Selectmen,

We understand that tonight there is a town meeting to hear public comments and questions regarding the consolidation of schools into a large elementary school at Valley View. We do not support the proposed consolidation of elementary schools into one mega elementary school on the Valley View property. We feel that significantly more information, time, and attention needs to be spent on our school facilities' **options** before this should move forward in any capacity. While we support the priorities outlined in the Portland Facility Study Committee (presented June 10, 2023), we have a myriad of concerns about the plan under present consideration-that is, a mega elementary school on the Valley View property. Please find some of our concerns listed below. We would appreciate this letter being read into the record.

- Why was the recommendation of the Portland Facility Study Committee, chaired by Lou Pear, and presented to the BOE and BOS in June 2023, after two years of extensive study and many focus groups, essentially ignored? Why are we changing plans from the recommendation of this committee?
- What was the **cost** of the Facility Study Committee over the two years - specifically Sightlines, Friar, and others, which the town financed?
- The Committee and the Superintendent determined (see the study report) that focus groups were the best method "to use community feedback to determine which options were palatable, etc." "The Committee determined that focus groups were preferable to other feedback gathering methods such as surveys.." (See p.15 of the Facility Study Report). Why was this changed after 17 focus groups - and a survey was **then** sent out to the town?
- The survey, available to townspeople, did not clearly represent **all** of the options and expenses for each option. It was confusing.
- In full transparency, for each possible option to upgrade our schools, what are the **ACTUAL** costs to the taxpayers on an apples to apples basis? Full price, state reimbursement, savings, actual cost, increase in individual homeowner taxes, etc.
- Townspeople will want to know what the town intends to do with any decommissioned school(s) **before** voting. What are the options to sell, take down, rent space or use for town purposes?
- In decommissioning schools or creating a mega school, how will our Parks & Rec Dept be able to offer activities that require gym space, if we are eliminating any of our current gyms, when we currently often don't have enough space?
- Have we considered curricular changes that reflect the world our children are moving into in the process of renovating our schools "like-new?" Will our learning spaces need to change to reflect future teaching needs and styles?
- The culture of our small schools is valued by students and families alike. Students are known by all staff and feel seen and accountable. That "culture" will NOT exist in a mega school.
- Housing all elementary students in one large mega school hardly seems safe. It also would require lunch waves to be scheduled anywhere from 10:30 to 1:30 pm. Do parents want their children eating lunch at those extreme times?
- Easier transitions are often mentioned as a benefit of a mega school. Having experienced this as a student, parent, and teacher, well-planned transitions can happen easily between schools reducing any student anxiety and allowing students to look forward to the next school adventure in a new building.
- As a former educator, I don't see the benefit to grouping such a wide range of developmentally different aged children in one building (pre-K through 5th grade). I don't see

the educational and “cultural” benefits. What research supports this? Many area schools have reduced their mega schools by building additional schools to separate age groups.

- The PROCESS of getting to this point with a mega school plan remains in question. Transparency for townspeople is essential as they will shoulder the burden of the cost.
- We need to invest in the education of our children by improving facilities and learning spaces for the future, by renovating and updating our elementary schools. We are currently in favor of renovating and updating two elementary schools, and decommissioning one school.
- **The question remains - which option is best fiscally, and for our community?**

While we are anxious for educational improvements to happen soon, we would like you to reconsider pushing through the School Consolidation plan in its present form so that the community can be adequately informed of all options and their costs. Thank you.

Darcy Parmelee wrote: Good afternoon Board of Selectmen, My name is Darcy Parmelee. I have 2 young boys that currently attend Gildersleeve (one will be moving onto BIS next year), I am a substitute paraprofessional in the Valley View Preschool, and also the Kiddie Camp Director for Summer Quest through Portland Parks and Recreation.

I wanted to take a minute and let you know that I appreciate all that you are trying to do and bring to our town. I know there is a lot of time and effort that go into these meetings and the preparation for such things can be daunting and cumbersome. As someone who has been a volunteer for PTO and CubScout Leader for 5 years now, I do understand (on the smaller scale) of how much effort needs to go into making events and projects run smoothly that only a small number of folks can understand.

I am writing to you to share my perspective of the current schooling situation we are in. I am in the unique position to not only have children currently in the school, but then work in one of the other schools, in a very specialized program. I want it to be very clear that I am in favor that the schools need some support. There are maintenance issues that can no longer be ignored or neglected. Ceilings are falling apart and the temperature inside the schools is dreadful. With that being said, the current plan and path that we are being shown just does not seem to fit what Portland needs right now. A super school? A mega school? Upon talking with others in town who have done some research, there are only about 3 other elementary schools in CT that would be as large as we are thinking of creating (one of them being the city of New Britain). I can whole heartedly tell you that is not the reason my husband and I chose to raise our children here. One of the most beautiful charms about Portland is the intimacy of the smaller elementary schools. I appreciate that the nurses know my children on a first name basis. I like that there are multiple schools for different playgrounds and basketball practices. I like that the Principal knows how hard-working my boys are and can tell me a story that happened throughout the school day. This is just the mom-side of me grateful to have small school communities for my children to be a part. For me to be a part of as PTO President. To be able to raise money and sponsor field trips and cultural arts programs. Things and experiences that I feel would not be possible if this school were to be created.

On the professional side, looking over the plans that have been created, it really feels as though not many took into consideration what would really be beneficial for the programs and children who attend our schools. Having one gym means reducing the

amount of times children will have PE a week. Band will have to practice on the stage while PE is having a class in the same space. One nurse and LPN is by far not enough for what the needs are within the school. As someone who has been in preschool for 2 years now, we are a small percentage of the student makeup, however within that small percentage, we have a 50% rate of students with needs. That's what the program is created for. We need more support, not less. On all fronts. This new plan seems to reduce what we are already trying to barely meet needs by as it is.

I know you have so many agendas going on right now, and I truly feel like this decision is being rushed. Again, I do not disagree that something needs to happen with our schools. I just think our town needs more time to make a better educated decision as to the direction that Portland wants to move forward. We are just beginning to see the benefits of the Portland Recreation Complex. The track was just finished. We have a new firetruck. We are in the midst of completing the Elmcrest Project. Brownstone Quarries was sold and is now going to be a Nordic Spa. That is A LOT for our little town to handle right. Adding this massive project. amongst all of those already existing projects, feels daunting and heavy in writing, but moreso in person.

So my hope in reaching out is just being heard. Our family loves Portland. We want things to grow and thrive and feel like this is happening. I think for right now this school situation really needs to take a step back and let the town breathe. A great deal is being asked of us as a community and the more we add on, the less the community feels heard. Again, I appreciate all you are doing and the time and effort put forth to make projects come to life. Best

Ingrid Swanson Moss wrote: Dear Board of Selectmen Members,

I understand that tonight is a BOS vote that considers propelling forward the process of School Consolidation, initiating the grant proposals, and sending it towards a referendum. \*\*I am writing to voice my concern about this plan and my personal **vote of non-support** for proceeding with the School Consolidation plan at this time.\*\*

To be transparent, and in the spirit of cooperation, I agree with many elements of the school consolidation plan:

- I agree that we need to invest in our town's education system.
- I agree that we need to renovate our elementary schools, all of which are in states of disrepair.
- I agree that our students need improved facilities and better physical learning spaces.
- As a taxpayer, I am willing to shoulder my portion of the increased taxes that it will take to make improvements -- I am not a vote of non-support because I am upset with the fiscal undertaking.
- And I hope that some of the momentum and energy towards improving our schools can be maintained and harnessed for a better plan.

However, I am very opposed to consolidating all of the schools into ONE GIANT elementary school. I have viewed the BOE meetings and presentations, I have attended forums to ask questions and share my perspective, and I will continue to be open to discussion at any time. I believe that I have a unique perspective as someone who grew up and was educated by Portland Public Schools, who then left town for several decades, and who has now returned with three elementary aged students who are in Portland Schools (entering Kindergarten, 2nd grade, and

3rd grade). My kids will be greatly impacted by this decision. Some of my main concerns and positions are bulleted below:

1) I support closing ONE elementary school and consolidating into two schools. My preference would be a Pre-K through 2nd grade school, a 3-5 school, PMS housing 6-8, then PHS.

2) The School Consolidation Plan means that Portland will end up with a giant elementary school (one of the largest around!) which is antithetical to what a Portland education has always looked like. We specifically moved to Portland (and out of Glastonbury) for our children to attend schools that were smaller, more intimate, less anonymous. In our small Portland schools, our kids are KNOWN to staff -- they are known by the teachers, by the janitors, by the nurse, by the secretaries, by administrators, by support staff, etc. The kids feel safe, they feel seen, they feel accountable -- these are things that improve their morale, their positivity about education, and their academic performance. In a school of 600 or more kids, that familiarity and intimacy is lost and it can never be replicated (I do not believe that the "neighborhoods" of grades adequately addresses this issue at all). This culture of SMALL schools is the very foundation of what makes Portland schools so fantastic and it would be devastating to lose that. While I am not arguing that the physical structures don't matter (they do -- and they need major improvement!), the culture, dynamic, and "feel" of the schools matters more.

3) Similarly, I hate to see the loss of administrators, nurses, specials teachers, etc. with the School Consolidation Plan, where the idea is to pay less by cutting those positions and consolidating fewer personnel to do the same job as many. I would rather pay more and have nurses who aren't maxed out on numbers and overwhelmed and who actually know our kids! Same with administrators! It's a loss for the students to try to max out the student ratios in order to save some dollars.

4) I am concerned that a very extensive study was conducted over multiple years by a committee (headed by Lou Pear), with focus groups, assessments, examinations of the buildings, and community input, and a comprehensive report was issued. Those recommendations -- to consolidate to TWO elementary schools -- have essentially been completely ignored. When I have asked why, the response centers around the subsequent survey that was conducted. My concern about the survey is that MANY folks didn't have anywhere near the info that the committee did (and misunderstood many questions on the survey). Also, we are touting the "majority" position as our guide when in actuality, the majority was only the majority by a very slim actual number of votes. And if the options were to be two rather than three (for example: 2 elementary schools vs. 3) -- I believe that the result would be VERY different, because those voting for 2 or 3 elementary schools greatly outnumber those who want complete consolidation.

5) I tried to remain very open-minded about the architectural plans for the mega-school but was disappointed by many aspects of that as well. A prime example is ONE gym (and not just a gym, it will be a "gym-itorium" because it will be a gym with a stage). ONE gym for 600+ students does not give our kids access to the physical gymnasium space often enough (when presently our elementary kids get gym twice a week). Also, the town is already maxed out on gym space, where we have three elementary gyms! My 3rd grade son couldn't get more basketball practice because there is no gym time, as is. Our after school programs, rec programs, basketball teams, indoor soccer teams, etc. will be so detrimentally impacted by losing two gyms and only having ONE. If this happens, I'd bet we will be knocking on neighboring towns' doors,

asking for space to conduct our programs and practices! This is just one example of how the mega-school plans do not adequately address what is really needed when losing two physical school structures. My longer list includes concerns about kids having to start eating lunch at 10am because of limited cafeteria time, as well as infrastructure concerns regarding parking (completely insufficient parking for a school and staff of 600+ students, let alone events that will occur at the school that involve families) and traffic issues on High Street and Hall Hill. I struggle to understand why we want to create these problems!

6) I am also concerned about how there is no plan for what will occur to the Gildersleeve and Brownstone properties. I have viewed the land use committee meetings and remain confused and concerned. As a resident whose home is less than 200 yards from Gildersleeve, I want to know with certainty what will occur to that property before I would ever vote to decommission it. If the solution is 200 more apartments -- something that would forever change my neighborhood, greatly impact my property's value, and change the safety of our portion of Main Street -- that will impact my vote. Likewise, Brownstone is an iconic building in this town and its fate is important to me. So I am personally concerned about these things, but I also think that town residents as a whole need this information. And we are not going to get needed votes on the education improvements unless we have thoughtfully planned through the collateral impacts and are able to offer those solutions. I don't want us to lose momentum for educational improvements, but I think we will lose votes for any plan without these appropriate collateral plans in place.

These are just a few of my concerns, and while I know that I will have the opportunity to place my official vote when things get to a referendum, I feel it is important for our elected representatives to understand the positions of folks in town. I welcome the opportunity to further discuss things at any point -- I welcome respectful dialogue and am committed to keeping an open mind. That said, at this time, I urge you to reconsider pushing through the School Consolidation plan in its present form and in such a rushed fashion. Thank you,

With no further comments the hearing was closed at 6:36 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon Hoy, Board Clerk