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SWAMPSCOTT APPROVES NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

BY KATELYN SAHAGIAN | September 13, 2021

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SWAMPSCOTT — Following three hours of heated debate, Town Meeting members overwhelmingly voted, by a 244-39 margin, to approve funding for a new consolidated elementary school in town.

With the vote, members authorized the town to pay for the cost of the new school, which is approximately \$97.67 million. Of that amount, the town's share of the project is expected to be \$64 million with state reimbursement — the project has been approved by the Massachusetts School Building Authority — estimated to be \$34.35 million. The next step is a town-wide vote in a special election on Oct. 19, which will ultimately determine if the project goes forward.

More than 300 Town Meeting members and residents gathered to debate the pros and cons of the project, which would condense the three existing elementary schools into one combined K-4 school. The three elementary schools, Stanley, Hadley, and Clarke, average about 90 years old.

Advocates say the new school would be a state-of-the-art institution for Swampscott. However, detractors have taken issue with the potential tax increase that would result from new school construction and the potential eminent domain taking of an easement from the Universalist Unitarian Church of Greater Lynn.

"This is a 50- to 100-year decision," said Town Meeting member from Precinct 5, Jaren Landen. Ultimately, she urged the members of the community to vote against the project. "I do question if this is the right plan and if we can afford to wait."

Ed Lyons, a Town Meeting member from Precinct 5, posted to Swampscott Nest, a Facebook group focused on everything happening in Swampscott, that he had decided to oppose the new school and would vote against it.

"I have long been suspicious of fancy schools, high-stakes tests, social competition, and successful parents pressuring children to achieve," Lyons wrote on a blog post. "A big school had better be worth it for me to give up that wonderful Stanley family feeling. I don't think what is being proposed would be."

While Lyons posted his opinion a day before the meeting, several people, including Andrew Samalis, of Precinct 6, voiced their own concerns during the meeting.

"We all agree the schools in town need big work," said Samalis. "I don't believe the current proposal fits our town and community."

Others spoke in favor of the new school, saying that students and staff deserve a chance to study at a modern school.

"'No' doesn't mean we build three new schools. 'No' means nothing happens. It means status quo. It means kids will be deprived of a modern education," said Select Board member David Grishman. "For the sake of our kids today and the kids of tomorrow, we need to vote 'yes.'"

Marianne Hartmann, a Board of Health member and nurse at Swampscott Middle School, who had worked at all of the elementary schools, said that the nurses' offices were incredibly small and out of date.

"They're unhealthy and physically and mentally challenging for workers and children alike," said Hartmann.

In the end, it was the voice of Town Meeting member Tom Driscoll who summed up the feeling behind all those who ultimately voted 'yes' for the new elementary school on Monday.

"Let the people vote on this," said Driscoll. "All people in the town want this on the ballot."

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