

Arlington Finance Committee Recommendation  
Capital Budget / School Capacity Expansion  
Article 3, Special Town Meeting

Since the year 2000, school enrollment in Arlington has been increasing, from approximately 4,200 students in the fall of 2000 to approximately 5,300 students in the fall of 2015, with the growth accelerating over the last five years as 500 net new students entered the district. This 26% increase in student enrollment has occurred with almost no increase in physical capacity at the town's nine school buildings. Projecting forward over the next decade, school enrollment is expected to continue increasing until it reaches approximately 6,000 students. The cumulative increase of 1,800 students (43%) is of a magnitude that requires the town to take action by increasing the physical capacity of our school buildings.

To address this challenge, a School Enrollment Task Force (SETF) was created in November 2015, charged with studying the issue and recommending a course of action. The SETF is comprised of the Town Manager, Superintendent of Schools, two members of the Board of Selectman, three members of the School Committee, and the Chairs of the Finance Committee, Capital Planning Committee and Permanent Town Building Committee. The SETF has held regular public meetings since November, presenting research and analyzing relevant data. The relevant data that was presented to and researched by the SETF can be found on the town's website at: <http://www.arlingtonma.gov/town-governance/all-boards-and-committees/school-enrollment-task-force>. The work of the SETF was conducted as a supplement to the work of the town's existing boards and committees that are already charged with handling financial and facilities matters and continue to do so.

After significant research and analysis, the SETF has concluded that additional school capacity needs to be added at the elementary school level in East Arlington and at the middle school level. If approved, this will be the second appropriation by Town Meeting to address the enrollment challenge, after having endorsed the town's installation of modular classrooms at Thompson during the January 2016 Special Town Meeting.

**The Reason for Selecting the Gibbs**

A review of the last 65 years of Arlington school enrollment proves why taking back the Gibbs is strategically the correct choice.

A November 15, 2015 Arlington Advocate<sup>1</sup> column reported that in 1955 Arlington had 6,500 students enrolled in its public schools, representing enrollment growth as the "baby boomer" generation was of school age. Comparing this information to the Capital Planning Committee's 2008 "Buildings Used by the Town of Arlington"<sup>2</sup> report, it becomes clear that the response to this population growth was to open several new K-6 elementary schools, including the Bishop (1950), Dallin (1956), Thompson (1956), and Stratton (1962). Arlington's school infrastructure peaked with 14 schools – 11 elementary, 2 junior high schools and 1 high school. By the 1980's, with the school age population in decline, the decision was made to close 4 elementary schools (Locke, Cutter, Crosby and Parmenter), and the smaller of the 2 junior high schools (Gibbs). By the year 2000, when the town was executing on its elementary school rebuild effort, Arlington's enrollment had decreased to 4,200<sup>3</sup> students, where it was expected to stay over the long-term. These were the enrollment numbers on which the elementary school rebuild effort was based. By October 2010, when enrollment had reached 4,800<sup>4</sup> students, the town embarked on the Thompson rebuild project, rebuilding an existing elementary school with a targeted enrollment of 380 students even though Thompson enrollment was 335 students at that time. It was expected that the additional 45 students would be brought to Thompson through state mandated redistricting. In October 2015, when school enrollment numbers were

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<sup>1</sup> <http://arlington.wickedlocal.com/article/20151115/news/151117216>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=10338> (PDF page 23 of 29)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.arlington.k12.ma.us/administration/redistricting/pdfs/redistrictingenrollprojcapacityanalysispres12-13-11.pdf> (pages 2 of 9 & 3 of 9).

<sup>4</sup> Arlington Public Schools Official Enrollment Report as of 10/1/2010

tabulated, Arlington had an in-district enrollment nearing 5,300<sup>5</sup> students, including 425 students at the Thompson, with the updated enrollment projection forecasting that school enrollment could reach 6,000<sup>6</sup> students over the next decade. This projection is made before taking into account any major development, including a potential Mugar 40B project in East Arlington.

Clearly, since it's difficult to predict the future, the town's decision-making must be strategic, allowing for flexibility as school enrollment levels change. While I know it's difficult to envision school enrollment decreasing, it will, as seen in Wellesley, MA, where after experiencing a 14.3% increase in population from 2003 to 2014, they're now anticipating an 11.6% decrease in enrollment over the next decade<sup>7</sup>.

By approving funding for the design phase of a Gibbs renovation, Town Meeting will begin the process of bringing back online a school building that provides multiple points of flexibility:

- It will immediately provide relief at the middle school level, bringing the Ottoson back within its designed range.
- If in 15 to 30 years, town-wide middle school enrollment decreases to 950 - 1,050 students, but East Arlington's enrollment continues to grow, the Gibbs could become a K-5 elementary school at limited cost.
- If in 5 years enrollment starts to grow at the levels of the first McKibbin study<sup>8</sup>, the town has the flexibility to convert the Gibbs to a K-5 elementary or 5<sup>th</sup> grade only school and potentially move the 8<sup>th</sup> grade to a wing of the newly renovated Arlington High School.
- If enrollment decreases town-wide, the Gibbs could be returned to surplus.

In addition to the flexibility provided by bringing the Gibbs back online, Arlington will have renovated the almost 90 year old town building, which is in need of costly repairs, securing the building as a town asset for the next 50 years. This is a critical expenditure of money on an asset that is centrally located in Arlington, within walking distance of Arlington Center, but positioned in East Arlington where there are very few government buildings.

No other option available to the town provides the same immediate relief and flexibility as taking back the Gibbs. For these reasons and more that will be discussed during the debate, we ask for your support under Special Town Meeting Article 3.

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The disagreement within the Finance Committee that resulted in a close vote was the other two options for middle school configuration, a 6-8 Gibbs or Ottoson Middle School addition. There was consensus that the increased annual operating costs of a 6-8 Gibbs, which the Superintendent determined would be significantly more than a 6<sup>th</sup> grade only Gibbs, was too costly when considering the other challenges faced by the town over the next five years (Minuteman, Thompson, Hardy, AHS rebuild, FY2020 operating deficit). There was also a belief within the committee that the town should select the Ottoson Middle School addition because of the lower annual operating costs once the building is constructed.

Dean Carman  
Member, Arlington Finance Committee

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=26967> (PDF page 1 of 3)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=28616> (PDF page 10 of 10)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=27003> (PDF page 3 of 5)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.arlingtonma.gov/home/showdocument?id=26965> (PDF page 36 of 45)

The recommended vote (11-8) of the Finance Committee is as follows:

VOTED: That the Town appropriate and borrow the sum of \$2,550,000 for the architectural design, engineering, and project management of the Gibbs School building, located at 41 Foster Street, Arlington, Massachusetts 02474, and authorize the Treasurer with the approval of the Selectmen, to issue any bonds or notes that may be necessary for that purpose, as authorized by General Laws Chapter 44, § 7, or any other general or special law, provided, however, that this appropriation and debt authorization be contingent upon passage of a Proposition 2½ debt exclusion referendum under General Laws Chapter 59, § 21C (k).