

# TOWN OF WILLINGTON

40 Old Farms Road  
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## BOARD OF FINANCE

Regular Meeting  
Hybrid- In Person and Online

February 16, 2023  
7:00 PM

*\*Minutes are not official until approved at the next regular meeting*

### Members Present (a quorum of 4 members is required to conduct business):

Stephanie (Stef) Summers <b>Chairman</b>	Geoffrey (Geoff) Prusak <b>Vice Chairman</b>	Christina Mailhos	Joseph (Joe) Sherrell	Peter (Pete) Tanaka <b>Secretary</b>	James (Jim) Marshall	Jim Gilligan (ALT)	Elisabeth (Lisa) Woolf (ALT)
In Person	In Person	Absent	In Person	In Person	In person	Via Zoom	In Person

### Also Present:

Mike Makuch, SBC Chair — In person  
Phil Stevens, Superintendent — In person  
Donna Latincsics, Business Manager — In person  
Erika Wiecenski, First Selectwoman — In person  
Members of the Public

Chairwoman Stephanie Summers called the meeting to order at 7:03 PM.

### SEATING OF ALTERNATES:

Stef moved to seat Lisa for Christina  
Joe seconded  
All in favor  
Motion passes

### APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Geoff moved to approve the minutes from January 19, 2023.  
Joe seconded  
Geoff yes, Joe yes, Peter abstain, Lisa yes, Jim M abstain, Stef yes  
Motion passes, 4-0, two abstentions

### PRESENT TO SPEAK:

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Lisa Eaton, 38 Timber Lane, stated that she is upset that people online keep claiming there is a lack of transparency coming from the School Building Committee (SBC). There are two years' worth of meetings posted on YouTube for the process of the potential new school, there were 6 community engagement events as well as a community forum at Hall School, there were multiple engagements at the transfer station conducted by Superintendent Phil Stevens, informational mailers sent to houses, and SBC members made themselves available to answer questions and comments on social media. Her opinion is the people who are making these claims are hoping to delay or even cancel the referendum and miss the grant deadline. She stated it is everyone's right to vote and instead of trying to delay the referendum, the people trying to do so should show up and vote "no" and let everyone else maintain their rights to have the opportunity to vote as they please. She recalled hearing about the interest in a new school when she first moved to town 10 years ago. She found Ralph Tullis's excel spreadsheet that was shown in the previous night's SBC meeting (Wednesday February 15) to have too many fluid parameters to show accurate data and said it causes more confusion. She preferred the chart where individuals could input their own assessed value and it generated the potential tax impact from just the school.

Michelle Cunningham, 41 Liska Road, thanked everyone who serves on a board or commission and volunteers their time for the betterment of the town. She is offended by comments and claims being made and spread on social media claiming board members have ill intents. She believed this as misinformation that promotes other people to lose faith in local government. She said we are a smaller community and as such should maintain a certain level of civility. She understood a lot of people have emotional responses to potential changes, but they should be able to stay calm and approach the conversations with facts and logic. She said it is essential for everyone to have all the facts and figures so voters can make an educated decision. She stated everyone should have realistic expectations, there are a million moving parts involved with guessing what will happen in the next five years. She said having a complex model with a million different outcomes based on possible variables that anyone can pick and choose which to display is not helpful. She preferred information that is straightforward instead of "what if" scenarios.

Nick Tella, 49 Mirtl Road, stated people have no trust due to shady behavior from members of the SBC. He stated it appears that First Selectman Erika is profiting, and Mike Makuch got a seat as a Selectman after getting her family's property chosen as the potential site for the new school. He said much of the information coming from the SBC has been shown in such a way as to make the new school seem like the favorable choice. He said the mailer that was sent to people's homes only stated one disadvantage for the new school and the tax impact shown wasn't made clear that it was a cumulative number. He said the SBC calculator fails to include government spending; it just shows the effects of the school. He said the calculator Ralph made was more detail-oriented and it should be given more weight than it is. He said rushing a \$65 million project is reckless and would like the BOF to inform the SBC to fulfill its charge of line D-10 to define the purpose of both schools and the associated costs. The BOF needs to know the total cost associated with this project and that includes the repercussions of not using the two existing schools. He said repairs should be made to the existing schools in segments that won't impact the mil rate as drastically. He said moving away from Hall will cost the Foundation roughly \$120,000 in property taxes which he doesn't think they will be able to afford based on data he found online. He thought that wasn't a good way to treat people who have been helping the town for many years and it doesn't look good to potential new people who want to invest in Willington. He stated he submitted a FOIA request to the town hall regarding any information linked to appointing James Marshall as a new seat on the BOF as well as becoming the BOF representative on the SBC, emails from BOF Chair Stef



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Summers to the SBC for the last 3 months, and emails from Stef Summers to Mike Makuch for the last 3 months.

Allan Ayers, 38 Timber Lane, wanted to thank everyone on the boards for everything they have done so far, and he doesn't want to create anymore delay in the process, but he felt he needed to speak to be a positive voice in Present to Speak versus the negative he has been hearing. He created a statement co-signed by 37 like-minded townspeople in the last 24 hours. The statement paraphrased read: they believe Willington needs a new school, they understand their personal tax liability if this project were to pass in referendum. They don't think further hearings are necessary and won't reach the people who haven't been engaged through the process already. There is a town meeting already scheduled with allotted time for Q and A's two weeks prior to the referendum. They believe there has been an abundance of information already provided and it is time to go to a vote. The 37 others signed in agreement and wanted to be represented in Present to Speak.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

### **1) School Building Committee presentation and Q&A- Mike Makuch, SBC Chair**

Stef invited SBC Chairman Mike Makuch and Superintendent Phil Stevens to begin their presentation. She thanked them for their tenacity in the last two years working on this project and encouraged people to watch the February 1<sup>st</sup> SBC meeting, which showed the discussion and background information leading to the board vote to send the new PreK-8 school choice toward referendum. Mike gave background information stating that until recently he was the BOF's representative on the SBC and, now that he is on the BOS and officially the chair of the SBC, the new BOF representative to the SBC is James Marshall. He said a lot of work has been done in the last two years leading up to the 8-2 vote on February 1 that resulted in the SBC recommending the new school, new site project to go to referendum. A special meeting was held on February 3<sup>rd</sup> adding the second question on the referendum for an auditorium, which would be an additional \$6 million cost to the project. He stated this is an expensive project and that is why they are here at the BOF to discuss it. The preliminary design shown on the first page of the presentation Power Point is based on the education specifications, as well as input from the townspeople including but not limited to separate bus and parent drop-off traffic, a natural buffer between the school (fields) and the existing houses on Glass Factory Road, natural light, both levels of the school would be able to egress to grade, nowhere in the school would be taller than two stories to conform to a residential neighborhood. It is set back from the road, there is ample space to expand if needed, and it is centrally located in town. So far, ledge has been found no closer than 18 feet to the surface and it is not a concern at this time. Pete asked if the site is located near the public water supply Willington is already paying for. Mike said no. Mike stated this building is a 50- to 100-year decision. He said this new building will help address all code-related and security issues we are currently facing at the two existing schools, particularly ADA compliance and ventilation requirements that are not currently feasible. Mike went over the state grant requirements as well as the difference between the reimbursement and the potential waivers. He stated our struggle has been our low enrollment, which limits the square footage and therefore the reimbursement. Conversations have been going on between the SBC and OSCGR (office of school grant review) and the state has admitted their formula for reimbursement doesn't work favorably for smaller schools, which is why there is an option for a waiver. Unfortunately, you can't apply for a waiver or see how much you would receive until a project has been submitted. That is why the referendum cost is based on the total cost without reimbursement and/or waiver. Keep in mind that not everything is eligible for the reimbursement. Our current reimbursement rate is 53.21%. Jim Marshall questioned the confidence in receiving the waiver. Mike answered that no one can say it is guaranteed, but there are a lot of factors showing it is highly likely we will receive the



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waiver. Phil and Mike mentioned that it was hinted that, with the size of our population, OSCGR was hesitant to fund a renovation project for two schools. They were pushing for consolidation and a new project. Mike mentioned the reimbursement percentage for a renovation project is 63.21%, but again not everything is eligible for reimbursement, which made the new school project less expensive by about 20%. Stef asked Jim M., an architect on school projects, if he would make a comment about his experience with likelihood of receiving a waiver. Jim responded by saying his understanding is there are waivers for a reason, to benefit school districts with lower enrollment. He reiterated there is no guarantee and you have to commit to the project in order to see if you will receive the waiver, which seems to be a cart before the horse situation. Pete wondered if there was any consideration made to consolidate with another district and regionalize. Mike and Phil said there were discussions made, but there were a lot of variables and potential problems involved with joining other towns, including collective bargaining agreements, bus times, etc. Because the state is pushing consolidation, they plan on using that to help argue for our right for a waiver. Lisa mentioned it sounds like the state is really pushing for responsible growth with our education and she believed the waiver is in place for a purpose. Mike mentioned yes, it is tax payer money spread out from the whole state and it is going to go somewhere, we might as well try to get some back to Willington. Pete mentioned he is very wary about what the state guarantees, he recalled putting up a lot of money for the new roof of Hall School and the State promised to give us 66% and then withdrew that offer when they heard we may be looking at building a new school. Mike mentioned the estimated operational cost savings of \$532,000. Most of the savings, \$442,000, would be from staffing salaries and benefits. Those numbers can't be more specific because it's likely the staff who would be cut would leave now and it would be hard to maintain the schools as they currently are. Based on feedback from the community, it was decided not to include these potential savings in the tax impact estimator as well as not include any potential other costs that could occur. The numbers shown are simply the cost of the school project. It was mentioned that the other cost savings from energy, transportation, contracts, supplies and equipment estimates are all conservative numbers. Information was discussed about the cost avoidance summary, a lot of projects included in the list are currently on CIP. The monetary amounts were projected to 2025 amounts. Jim M. said that these numbers are based on the ability to complete these jobs as a single project, which is highly unlikely that they would be able to be completed in one summer, so the cost would actually be a lot higher spreaded out over more years. Pete said that we would save this money if we went to a new school. If we use these buildings for something else, we are still on the hook for paying the money to make the repairs. Mike explained how to read the project cost slide, saying the percentages of potential reimbursement are based on what items are eligible for reimbursement. It is not as simple as taking that percentage off the total and coming up with the new number. Phil cautioned that every year the overall reimbursement rate goes down statewide. The debt borrowing limits were explained. We are allowed to incur up to a net \$59,632,966 for a school. There are other limits allotted for other uses including general purpose, sewers, urban renewal, and pension deficit, so other potential projects needing bonding wouldn't be impacted from the school project. The numbers for each category are calculated by multiplying our revenue by a certain multiple (2¼ times up to 4½ times). Pete said these are limits, not goals. Mike went over the current timeline. In order to meet the June grant application deadline, the referendum needs to be on March 28 (6am to 8pm). Pete said some townspeople have been requesting to add a town hearing, he questioned if the town meeting scheduled for March 14 at 7pm also counted as a town hearing. Mike answered that it wouldn't be officially called a town hearing, due to the parameters for the notification process, but he believed it would serve the same function. Erika said people would be discussing the topic at the town meeting and this is the process of a selectman-initiated referendum, that our town process only requires a town meeting. She said that is why we are doing a selectman-initiated referendum, to give everyone the opportunity to cast a vote, instead of



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deciding at a town meeting. Pete said that for our total budget, which is usually only \$18 or \$19 million, we hold a public hearing, then a town meeting, then referendum, and to negate a public hearing for something that costs three times the amount of our whole budget doesn't seem right. Mike said the way the town budget is presented is different than the process the SBC has been doing with this school project, including two years of meetings, public outreaches, etc., which he believes is doing the same process, if not more than a public hearing, even though that's not what it is called. It was discussed that the town meeting adjourns to referendum. Stef suggested hiring a professional as a moderator for the town meeting. Joe questioned if the town meeting would be carried over if the volume received at the town meeting was too large for one night. Erika stated the town meeting has to be no less than 7 and no more than 14 days before the referendum, it is scheduled to be 14 days. Erika will get an answer about whether or not they would be able to hold an additional special meeting within that timeframe. Mike concluded that the SBC is respectfully asking the BOF to appropriate the total project cost to allow the Superintendent to apply for the reimbursement grant. Pete asked if the project will be cancelled if we don't end up getting the reimbursement they are saying we are going to get. Mike said we would know the reimbursement rate prior to contracting with anyone and another discussion would be had with the townspeople if the reimbursement fell through. The referendum question, which must be worded to describe the "worst-case-scenario" full amount for a new school, wouldn't put the town on the line for covering those costs entirely. Stef questioned what happens if we don't receive a waiver. Erika answered we would use every resource available to us, including our state representative and state senator, to argue against that. Stef questioned when the last time was that we went for a school project that required debt. Mike answered it was in the '70s and '80s. Stef wondered if that amount of time since we went "to the well" would look favorable in the state's eyes. Phil mentioned he has to check off a box and it is expected that we are to be in the building for at least 20 years any time we get funding for a project. Ralph Tulis, an SBC member in the audience, questioned if the costs incurred between the referendum and the application fall on the town's budget. It was answered yes. Mike and Phil went over the project impact on a tax spreadsheet. In this spreadsheet you can input your assessed value of your house, and the tax impact from the school project will calculate up to 20 years for each of the four scenarios (new school with auditorium no waiver, new school without auditorium no waiver, new school with auditorium with waiver, new school without auditorium with waiver). It was noted the last column in any option is the total amount of additional taxes of the previous years combined. You can see the estimated impact in any given year. Ralph wanted to point out that at the end of the bond you will be paying more in taxes than you are now even though the increase will go down after year 4. Pete pointed out the library cost roughly 3 million and it has impacted us for 20 years. The highest mil rate is estimated as a 10-point increase. Mike mentioned there will of course be impacts to the budget from other town spending or revenue changes and none of that is speculated in this spreadsheet calculator and this is based off the 2021 grand list. Lisa questioned if it was safe to say that if your taxes go up and you have a new school your house will be worth more. Discussion ensued with varied views. There is a link on the town website and a how-to video to find your assessed value and use this spreadsheet. The median assessment in town after removing the properties over \$600k was \$135k. The reason the total amount of \$62,740,000 is stated in the wording of the question going to referendum is because that is the total maximum amount including interest on the bond and would be noted as a "not to exceed" value. Mike said that Ralph also created a spreadsheet and his includes the ability to estimate variables, including other bonded debt, Grand List changes, budget increases, etc. Mike stated the SBC does include in their charge to identify potential uses of the existing school buildings, and that is in the works. Pete said the use isn't his concern, it is the cost associated with the reuse. He said normally, if we had to put a new roof on a school, there is reimbursement available from the state for those repairs. If we put a new roof on the same building but it is now being used as a town office building, there would be no



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reimbursement. Lisa said the building regulations are tougher for schools than for other uses, so the roof may be cheaper if it is not on a school. Pete asked if it was 60% cheaper. Mike said they have been having conversations with the Hall Foundation members and they are well aware of what is going on and do not feel like they are being hung out to dry. Pete questioned if there was any discussion on the opportunity for other potential projects in town if this project goes through. Mike reminded Pete the bonding limits are separated for schools and for other projects and he said the SBC hasn't been working on that. Joe asked what the student capacity is for this new school, especially if the SBC is anticipating this will entice new families to come to town. BOE Chair Michelle Cunningham, who was in the audience, answered that there is room for a 25% increase in the student population, which was projected to be 419. Lisa and Mike confirmed that the 100-foot natural buffer left between the school and the existing neighbors will always be there, and that was requested by the current landowner.

## 2) BOF Discussion

Stef brought up our Moody's rating which is Aa3 and rates us very highly in regard to our ability to pay off debt. Stef brought up our fund balance, which is forecasted to be \$3,044,483 by June 30, 2023. Stef mentioned that number is 15.5% of the Fiscal Year 2024 budgetary expenditure appropriation, and the BOF typically likes to keep that percentage between 8 and 12%. It was mentioned that it would be nice to have the updated Grand List as soon as possible. Ralph and the BOF discussed the complexities of his tax impact calculator, which includes his projected economic variations outside the school project impact.

## 3) FY24 budget follow-up

### CORRESPONDENCE:

#### PRESENT TO SPEAK:

Peter Latincsics, 97 Trask Road, stated it is up to the BOF to digest the budget as a whole and present it to the town accordingly and he thinks Ralph's spreadsheet does a good job of aiding in that. He added the best place to do that would be in public hearing prior to town meeting, which is the way it has always been done. He stated a public hearing is quite fundamentally different than a town meeting and it is also different than public outreach attempts. He stated that in a public hearing nothing can curtail the discussion but at a town meeting at any given time someone can call the end of discussion.

Nick Tella, 49 Mirtl Road, stated he agreed with Peter and would like to see a public hearing to ensure everyone gets to speak their opinion.

### GOOD AND WELFARE:

Peter moved to adjourn the meeting at 9:40 pm.

Lisa seconded

All in favor

Motion passes

Respectfully submitted,

Samantha Sperry

Recording Secretary

RECEIVED  
WILLINGTON, CT.

2023 MAR 14 A 9:51

  
TOWN CLERK

Present to Speak

Willington Board of Finance

Feb. 16, 2023

Lisa Eaton

38 Timber Lane

First, I would like to thank all of the committees involved in the process of bringing the school building project to referendum. I recognize that this work requires considerable investment of time and expertise.

I have been attentive in watching this process unfold. It's been exciting to see progress being made in moving our schools into a 21st century built environment. Through these observations, however, one thing, in particular, has stood out that I have found concerning.

I very naively assumed that once the SBC supported an option this option would, of course, go to referendum. Naturally, I thought that ultimately the decision to support a new school would lay in the hands of the townspeople. Through each step of this process, however, there have been attempts, by a small yet vocal group, to stop or otherwise delay bringing the school building to a referendum, effectively denying the opportunity for the townspeople to vote.

Arguments for stopping the referendum range from baseless charges of corruption, to a lack of transparency, and to a lack of engagement efforts to inform the public on the details of the school.

Let's be very clear on what is factual. There are 56 video and audio recorded meetings rich with detail spanning over a two year time period posted on youtube, these meetings have also provided numerous present to speak opportunities. SBC representatives also led a community presentation event at Hall School, held six community engagement events throughout the town (including at the library, senior center, Center School, and the Town Office), and a community public forum event at Hall School. Representatives also partook in multiple engagement events at the transfer station. Moreover, the SBC has sent multiple mailers to every household in town, mailers that provided details on the school building process. The mailers and social media were also used to promote uptake of a survey to gather thoughts, concerns, and preferences from the townspeople regarding the school



buildings. Paper surveys were also placed around town at the town hall, library, Hall school, and senior center. Some SBC members have even made themselves available to answer questions on social media.

I state, unequivocally, that SBC representatives have done their due diligence in engaging the townspeople and have provided every reason to be confident that this behavior of providing information and making themselves available will continue leading up to the referendum and beyond.

The repeated argument made to stop or delay bringing the school building project to referendum, because the townspeople have not been engaged, lacks credibility in the face of the evidence.

In my opinion, it is clear that people who are trying to stop or delay the process do so with the hope that the referendum will not ever occur or that it will be delayed to the point where the grant deadline with the state has been missed. I don't even necessarily blame people for working this angle, as it's clear from the data that the project has the potential to pass, and stopping the referendum is effectively a last ditch effort to catapult the project, but it doesn't make it right. There is a very important distinction to be made here, if you do not want to see progress made on the school building project you are a "no" vote and that is your right as a citizen of the town (of course assuming that the referendum occurs). That is, however, conceptually and categorically very different from trying to stop the entire town from voicing their desire or not for a new school building through a vote.

When I first moved here I learned that there was interest in town to build a new school. That was over ten years ago, it is time to let people vote and to let people vote in March. Board of Finance, please do not engage in actions that would stop or delay this vote.

As a side note, in regards to last night's meeting, I found the document Ralph presented to be somewhat unwieldy. The parameters it's based on appear too fluid to be considered robust predictors of future tax burden. And, most importantly, if the concern is truly to reduce confusion, this document does the opposite. Encouraging people to access their tax burden information based on the actual known expense of the building is a much clearer approach.



From: **Allan Ayers** <[rareayers@gmail.com](mailto:rareayers@gmail.com)>

Date: Thu, Feb 16, 2023, 5:27 PM

Subject: Message to BOF

To: Allan Ayers <[rareayers@gmail.com](mailto:rareayers@gmail.com)>

2-16-23

Allan Ayers -38 Timber Lane

"We believe that Willington needs a new school. We are aware of our personal tax liability if this project were to go to referendum and pass. We are, however, concerned that efforts are being made to delay or stop the referendum, and feel that further hearings are unwarranted and redundant in that they will likely not reach citizens who haven't already engaged after months of encouragement in many forms of media to do so. Moreover, a town meeting will be scheduled for questions and answers approximately two weeks prior to the referendum. We believe there has been an abundance of information provided and it's time to put this decision to the people by way of referendum. We feel that the Board of Finance should do their due diligence, but be mindful of the amount of time and commitment by multiple boards, hired experts, and commissions used to get to today, and move this forward to referendum without delay.

This message is co-signed with permission by the following residents

Katherine Kenyon – 16 Mason Road

Amy (Lynn) Sherzai

Kirstie Farrar

Jeff Farrar

Carole-Lynn Saros

Greg Saros

Ayla Saros

Sarah J Anderson

William Viveiros

Matthew Sandness

Kristine Sandness

Beth Bean

Laurie Semprebon

Brian G Semprebon

Christopher Hughes

Yuna Davtyan

Brian Allison

Kristen Bryant

Jason Ross