MONTAGUE CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, September 23, 2026, 3:30 pm, Town Hall First Floor Conference Room

In Attendance:

CIC Members: Gregory Garrison (GG), Ariel Elan (AE), Jason Burbank (JB)

Absent: Chris Menegoni (CM), Lynn Reynolds (LR)

Town Staff: Christopher Nolan-Zeller (CNZ) – Assistant Town Administrator, Walter Ramsey (WR) – Town Administrator (arrived at 3:53 pm)

Meeting called to order 3:35 pm, GG Presiding

1. Call to Order and Approve any outstanding meeting minutes: 4/1/26

   MOTION to approve the minutes of 4/1/26, by GG, JB Seconded. GG-AYE, AE-AYE, JB-AYE. MOTION PASSED

   AE asked JB if he had a chance to meet with the Police Chief to review the building's HVAC needs. JB responded that he had not yet.

2. Review of Gill-Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) Capital Article Request for October Special Town Meeting (Elementary School Building Steering Committee member and Town Administrator Walter Ramsey, invited)
   a. Consolidated Elementary School Feasibility Study ($1,750,000)

   GG stated that as a member of the Elementary School Building Committee (ESBC), he and the other committee members had a chance to visit both elementary schools last week accompanied by teachers and principals at both buildings. This was the school district's first successful application to the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) for this project after two previous unsuccessful attempts.

   AE stated that the cost seemed concerningly high for a feasibility study, and requested a line-item breakdown. GG responded that the school district's Business Manager would be the best person to ask for this, but overall the cost estimate was built from MSBA's estimates based on recent funded projects.

   AE expressed that the Town should take a closer, critical look at these types of escalating costs, especially after hearing people's financial concerns during the recent Library project campaign.

GG added that this would be given some level of reimbursement from MSBA, but the exact reimbursement rate was not yet known.

AE asked how this appropriation would be funded. GG responded that this was the purview of the Finance Committee, and CIC's role was simply to recommend whether or not this project was an appropriate use of local funds.

GG added that the feasibility study would review multiple options, but the most likely anticipated outcome was a renovation and expansion of the Sheffield School, allowing for consolidation of grade levels into one building and the closure of the Hillcrest School. AE added that construction of a new building would also likely be considered, as old buildings come with expensive hidden costs to renovate, such as asbestos concerns.

GG stated that the outcome of the feasibility study would be a series of options to be considered.

JB expressed agreement that $1.75 million for a feasibility study seemed outrageous, and questioned why such a high cost was necessary.

AE asked whether anyone from Finance Committee had been involved in discussions so far. GG responded that ESBC had only had two meetings so far, and there was only a short window of time before the vote at Special Town Meeting.

AE expressed preference for postponing this Town Meeting vote if possible, with concern that the projected MSBA reimbursement rate may underperform predictions, as occurred with the Library project's grant funding.

WR arrives at meeting.

WR provided an approximate cost estimate for the full requested amount, which included $1.2 million in architect's fees, $400k in Owner's Project Manager (OPM) fees, $100k for environmental and site assessment work, and $50k in miscellaneous costs.

JB asked about the anticipated study timeframe. WR noted that the feasibility study was expected to take two years.

AE requested that a line-item breakdown be provided before Town Meeting to help explain why this cost was so high, questioning why the feasibility study costs were several times higher than they were for the same stage of the Library project. WR responded that these costs were proportional with overall expected project costs. GG added that large projects often correspond with large OPM fees, and that this was solely a cost estimate, still subject to the Town's competitive procurement of OPM and architectural services. WR added that MSBA imposes several very specific requirements on its awardees that contribute to the overall costs.

AE asked for more information about the MSBA reimbursement rate, and whether any more precise data could be provided before Town Meeting. WR noted that he would try to find more information, but this estimate was developed based on data from past local projects funded with MSBA assistance, including a window replacement project, and the ongoing roof replacement at Gill Elementary School.

GG expressed some concern about the eventual construction costs, given the shock of the feasibility study cost alone.

AE noted that this tied into an existential question about statewide education funding over the next decade. GG related this to the upcoming school district regionalization vote. Existing conditions for Montague included two inadequate elementary school buildings unequipped for providing a 21st Century education, unmet student needs, and Special Education professionals working out of closets.

GG explained that the ESBC requested that the CIC consider reviewing and recommending this request, based primarily on the shortcomings of the existing facilities, also expressing that change was needed at the community's schools, either through regionalization or other improvements.

AE added that the Six-Town Regionalization proposal would not directly impact the elementary schools. GG noted that the result of the 10/6 regionalization vote would likely have a strong influence on the discussion regarding this project at Town Meeting.

JB asked what overall enrollment trends at the schools looked like. AE noted that while they were currently declining, some proposed new local housing developments had the potential to reverse this trend.

GG explained that if CIC chose, it could include a memo calling for more information and a broader discussion about this project, rather than taking a vote of recommendation, also noting the tremendous need for similar projects in school districts across the state, and the MSBA requirement for the community to appropriate the entire amount before being eligible for reimbursement. If the Town Meeting vote fails, that marks the end of this project.

AE expressed frustration with a lack of transparency in the numbers provided by MSBA, including the reimbursement rate and justification for their feasibility study cost estimate. GG noted that much of the uncertainty was due to variation in outcomes based on which communities will ultimately remain in each round of the program, versus which will end up withdrawing.

JB agreed that the cost of the study seemed unreasonably high, but also acknowledged that this was still likely the most advantageous path for the Town to be able to meet the facility needs of its schools.

GG summarized that Montague has made significant progress in the past few decades, with substantial investment in its public services and local infrastructure, but the schools had been the missing piece of this revitalization. This request was the Town's opportunity to put skin in the game toward closing this gap.

AE expressed overall agreement, but called for the state to begin looking more critically at how to reduce the costs of participating in these types of programs.

MOTION to recommend the GMRSD Request for the Consolidated Elementary Schools Feasibility Study by GG, JB Seconded. GG-AYE, JB-AYE, AE-ABSTAIN. MOTION PASSED.

3. Review of Committee report to October 28, 2026 Special Town Meeting

   GG explained that building assessments completed in the past few years showed significant capital needs at the schools, with an estimated $12 million needed just to meet the minimum needs, and that total still doesn't include the cost of making the Administration wing of the Sheffield building accessible. For this reason, he stated that cost avoidance was the primary justification for proceeding with MSBA, as the alternative would bring even more significant cost burdens.

   The committee agreed to table its vote on approving this report to its next meeting.

4. Review proposed updates to Capital Request Form for Vehicles & Equipment

   GG introduced the new form, crediting CM for the idea of a separate request form for this category.

   AE expressed appreciation for the new form.

   GG requested that a line be added asking requesters if the vehicle or equipment being replaced has an estimated fair market resale value.

   AE requested that the 'Relative Priority' category be moved to the first page of the form just under 'Proposed Article Wording.'

   MOTION to approve the new Capital Request Form for Vehicles & Equipment with the two revisions as discussed for use in the FY28 Capital Planning cycle by GG. Seconded by JB. GG-AYE, AE-AYE, JB-AYE. MOTION PASSED.

5. Updates on ongoing capital projects

   CNZ spoke briefly about current construction projects in Town.

6. Topics not anticipated in the 48 hour posting requirements

None.

7. Schedule next meeting

   AE expressed a general preference for meeting either later in the afternoon, or in late morning. GG noted that Wednesdays continued to be his preference, but a further discussion about shifting the regular meeting time could occur at the next meeting with all members present.

   The committee agreed to meet again the following week, Wednesday 9/30, at 3:30 pm.

8. Adjournment

MOTION to close the meeting at 4:45PM by GG, JB Seconded. GG-AYE, AE-AYE, JB-AYE. MOTION PASSED.

Respectfully Submitted,

Christopher Nolan-Zeller