

# **School Building Committee Report:**

## **Understanding the Elementary School Building Project**

### **MSBA Feasibility Study/Schematic Design Request**

***Why is Town Meeting being asked to consider this project, and what would an investment of up to \$1,750,000 - with an estimated local share of approximately \$437,500- buy us?***

In January 2023, the Montague Selectboard issued a letter supporting the Gill-Montague Regional School District's pursuit of MSBA assistance for Sheffield Elementary School. The District's 2025 Statement of Interest (SOI) identifies renovation/addition of Sheffield and the potential consolidation of Sheffield and Hillcrest into a unified PreK-5 facility as options to be evaluated. The feasibility process is intended to determine which approach best addresses educational, facility, and long-term cost needs.

The District submitted its current SOI in April 2025. In December 2025, the MSBA Board voted to invite Sheffield into the Eligibility Period, which began May 1, 2026 and runs through January 26, 2027. A key requirement during this phase is local authorization of funding for Feasibility Study/Schematic Design. That process examines existing conditions, educational needs, potential alternatives, and costs. If the project advances, the Town currently anticipates MSBA reimbursement of approximately 75% of eligible study costs; the actual reimbursement rate and eligible costs will be determined by MSBA.

The Town and District have pursued the MSBA process to evaluate whether a state-supported project can address facility and educational needs while limiting the local financial impact.

### **Why Consider the Project Now - and What Value Will the Study Provide?**

The Elementary School Building Committee recommends a not-to-exceed budget of \$1.75M based on recent Feasibility Study/Schematic Design budgets for reasonably comparable public school projects. The actual amount spent may be lower. MSBA requires the local applicant to authorize the full study budget before proceeding.

#### ***What Economic Choices Will It Illuminate?***

The feasibility study will compare the long-term cost and implications of continued capital investment in the existing facilities with MSBA-supported renovation/addition or new-construction alternatives. Existing capital needs are substantial, but the ultimate local cost of each option is not yet known. The purpose of the study is to develop reliable scope and cost information so those alternatives can be compared publicly on a consistent basis.

### ***What Are the Space and Program Needs?***

Beyond capital costs, the study will examine how well the existing buildings support current educational programs. Despite lower overall enrollment, Hillcrest and Sheffield are currently repurposing common and classroom spaces to accommodate programs and services. Modern educational programs also require specialized spaces for student services, accessibility, collaboration, and other functions that were less common when the buildings were designed. The feasibility study will evaluate those needs alongside enrollment and building capacity.

The adjacent District Administration building, which was formerly used by Sheffield Elementary students on a limited basis, is not fully ADA accessible and has received limited improvements in recent decades. One option that may be examined is relocating District staff to TFHS/GFMS to make additional space available for a consolidated school. Whether that option is appropriate, and what costs would be eligible for MSBA reimbursement, would be determined through the study.

### ***What Questions Will the Feasibility Study Help Answer?***

The Feasibility Study will provide a clearer understanding of existing facility needs and compare alternatives, including continued Town-funded capital repairs, renovation/addition, and new construction where appropriate. Each path carries costs and tradeoffs. The study will provide structural, educational, operational, and financial analysis to inform any future recommendation.

### ***What Does Existing Data Tell Us - and What Are Its Limitations?***

Existing data provides a useful starting point but does not answer all of the questions before the Town. In 2020, the Town commissioned professional building-condition assessments to identify repairs and replacements needed at Hillcrest, Sheffield Elementary, the Sheffield Gym/Auditorium, and the District Administration building. The capital-expenditure schedules totaled approximately \$11.4 million over 15 years (beginning in 2020) in 2020 dollars. Applying approximately 32% construction-cost escalation since that time would place that total at about \$15 million in current dollars.

These figures should be read as planning-level estimates of identified repair and replacement needs, not fully designed project costs. The assessments did not anticipate later issues such as the Hillcrest asbestos tile failure, and they did not comprehensively address space constraints or system modernization. They primarily identified work needed to keep the buildings operational - roofs, masonry, windows, boilers, and other components - along with selected accessibility and system upgrades. The studies remain useful, but they do not answer the broader questions now before the Town and schools.

The feasibility study will provide a substantially more detailed analysis of structures, spaces, systems, site conditions, program needs, and costs. Its findings will be useful even if a major building project is not ultimately pursued. Importantly, authorizing the study does not obligate the Town to construct a new school. It allows the Town and District to compare the expected costs, benefits, and limitations of repairing and modernizing existing facilities with potential MSBA-supported project alternatives.

# A Little More About MSBA and Its Role in the Project

MSBA is a primary source of state funding for MA public school building projects. Montague has previously participated in MSBA-supported projects, including Turners Falls High School/Great Falls Middle School and past window and roof projects.

## 1. What Is the MSBA & Why Now?

- **The Opportunity:** The Town must authorize a \$1.75M Feasibility Study/Schematic Design budget. If the project advances and costs are eligible, the Town currently anticipates reimbursement of approximately 75%, subject to final MSBA determination. MSBA participation can substantially reduce the local cost of eligible planning and construction expenses.
- **Our Status:** Sheffield Elementary School is in MSBA's Eligibility Period. Successful completion of the eligibility requirements would allow the District to be considered by the MSBA Board for a subsequent invitation to Feasibility Study.
- **The Requirement:** The Eligibility Period requires local authorization for Feasibility Study/Schematic Design. If invited to Feasibility Study, the MSBA process will evaluate building conditions, educational needs, site conditions, and facility alternatives.

## 2. What Does the \$1,750,000 Actually Pay For?

The MSBA requires a structured, multi-phase planning process. The appropriation would fund the MSBA-approved Owner's Project Manager (OPM), design team, engineering, environmental and site investigation, educational programming, cost estimating, and related work through preliminary schematic design. The purpose is to evaluate alternatives - including repair, renovation/addition, and new construction - and develop reliable scope and cost information before any future construction decision. The process is expected to take approximately **12-18 months**:

| Role/Task                      | Purpose & Scope                                                                                             | Est. Budget |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Owner's Project Manager (OPM)  | Direct project oversight and state compliance                                                               | \$400,000   |
| Architect & Designer Team Fees | Building evaluation and schematic design; learning-space and curriculum alignment analysis; cost estimating | \$1,200,000 |
| Environmental/Site             | Site analysis, environmental, and structural testing                                                        | \$100,000   |

|             |                                                              |          |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| Contingency | Legal and state filing costs, contingency, and reserve funds | \$50,000 |
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### 3. How Does This Request Compare to Other Districts?

Montague's \$1.75M request falls within the range of several recent MSBA Feasibility Study/Schematic Design appropriations for public school projects in Massachusetts.

- **Anna E. Barry Elementary, Chicopee:** \$1.63M / 340 students
- **Central Elementary, East Bridgewater:** \$1.5M / 510 students
- **Muraco Elementary, Winchester:** \$1.5M / 300 students
- **Crosby Elementary, Pittsfield:** \$2M / 445 students
- **Marguerite Small Elementary, Dennis-Yarmouth:** \$1.5M / 300 students

## 4. What Approval Would - and Would Not - Authorize

**What Approval Would Authorize:** Approval would satisfy the local funding requirement necessary to continue through the MSBA Eligibility Period and, if subsequently invited by the MSBA Board, proceed to Feasibility Study. It would not select a preferred building solution.

- Funding an expert-led investigation to analyze alternatives, including repair, renovation/addition, and replacement or new construction, as applicable.
- Maintaining eligibility for potential MSBA reimbursement of eligible project costs.
- Developing more reliable scope and cost information before any future construction funding decision.

**What Approval Would Not Authorize:**

- **Construction:** This vote does not authorize building construction or groundbreaking.
- **A specific project:** It does not commit the Town to a final building design or preferred alternative.
- **Future project funding:** Any future construction project would require separate local funding authorization. Depending on the financing approach, a ballot question may also be required.

## 5. If Funding Is Not Authorized

- **MSBA Eligibility Period:** The District would not complete the local funding requirement by the January 26, 2027 deadline and would be required to withdraw the current SOI and reapply in a future filing period.
- **Future capital needs:** The Town would still need to address necessary repairs and capital improvements at the existing facilities. MSBA participation in those future costs would depend on separate eligibility and approval.
- **Timing and costs:** Delaying the facility evaluation may affect project timing and expose future work to additional cost escalation, although future costs cannot be known with certainty.