Montague Elementary School Building Committee
Frequently Asked Questions

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This.FAQ.is.a.living.document?intended.to.establish.a.common.basis.of.facts.and.information.regarding.the.proposed.Elementary.School.Feasibility.Study¡.It.is.intended.to.provide.concise.responses.to.common.resident.questions.as.the.Town.considers.to.authorize.funding.for.an.MSBA_supported.feasibility.study.and?if.authorized?will.refocus.on.questions.related.to.the.implementation.of.that.study.and.analysis.of.the.Town's.options.for.improvement.of.its.educational.facilities¡.

What is the MSBA and what is our experience with the program?

The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) is a quasi-independent public authority that provides grants that partially fund municipal and regional school construction and renovation (building) projects in the Commonwealth. MSBA is funded through the state sales tax, with one cent of the state's 6.25 cent per dollar tax directed to MSBA to fund its subsidy of public-school building projects.

Proposed projects are only funded after extensive study of the need and in this way, it is a very competitive process. The projects that present the greatest need and are aligned with efficiency priorities are best positioned for funding. In recent history, MSBA supported renovation and expansion of our middle/high school, and certain eligible improvements to Sheffield Elementary.

Why are we contemplating an Elementary School Building Project?

In 2020, the Town funded building assessments of several municipal buildings, including our two elementary schools (Hillcrest serves grades preK-1; Sheffield grades 2-5). The arm's length study revealed expected capital repair costs in the vicinity of $11.4M over 15 years. Applying a public construction inflation rate of 32%, the estimated 2026 cost for those improvements would be $15M. However, that assessment was of limited depth and missed some capital needs that have emerged (e.g., the Hillcrest ACT tile challenges). It also did not consider the educational space limitations within those buildings

In 2023, fearing over-investment in self-funded repairs to outdated facilities, the Selectboard submitted a letter of support for a Gill-Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) application for MSBA assistance. A key goal of the Feasibility Study phase of the project is to clearly articulate the expected cost of various alternative pathways our community could take to ensure we provide and maintain safe and appropriate educational facilities to our elementary school students.

What do we expect to gain from a Feasibility Study?

Put simply, the Feasibility Study will answer our questions and inform our path forward.

At the onset of acceptance into the Feasibility Study phase, we will procure an expert Owner's Project Manager (OPM) and architecture design firm to assist us and lead the assessment what we expect would be several alternative ways the Town might meet its educational facility challenges. The first step in the Feasibility Study process is to define the alternatives our community wants to explore, which we will do with input and affirmation from the Selectboard and School Committee, and with opportunity for public input. We can speculate that the Town will want to test the feasibility and cost of the following options, at least:

- Implementing an aggressive capital repair program for our existing two elementary school buildings;
- Renovating the Sheffield and Administration buildings on Crocker Ave, and consolidating elementary into these spaces;
- Building a new elementary school on the current Sheffield-Hillcrest campus or at the high school campus if that presents value;
- Integrating the elementary population into the existing middle and high school buildings.

MSBA is aware of preliminary interest in studying these scenarios and all will be fully eligible for reimbursement. Each alternative will be very rigorously assessed by experts from each building trade, with repair or new construction costs estimated based on current school construction cost data. Educational space needs will be articulated relative to established standards and we would seek to optimize MSBA reimbursement as options related to each approach are considered.

We will use the MSBA project analysis tool to estimate the reimbursement level of each design element, allowing us to value engineer iteratively. Our building committee – comprised of town officials, appointed residents, and school staff – will have input and guard community concerns relative to both cost and educational impacts at every step. With our alternatives defined and priced, public engagement will begin and the Selectboard and School Committee will consider which alternative to advance to MSBA for a full Schematic Design. The schematic design phase will lead to an even more detailed project construction plan and provide a highly reliable basis for estimation of cost, including a final MSBA reimbursement rate applicable to the proposed project.

At that point, a specific school building project proposal would presumably be presented to the Town Meeting and the electorate. If not, the Town could use the study to inform a phased capital improvement strategy for our existing elementary buildings, leveraging the detailed engineering and construction analyses performed on the buildings in the alternatives analysis phase. While potentially less ideal cost-wise over time or educationally, the data would inform a clear-eyed capital plan and funding strategy, to include far more limited MSBA support.

So what level of support would MSBA provide to Montague?

For.Feasibility¿..Base MSBA reimbursement rates vary from 31 to 80 percent. Based on 2026 community demography, Montague is eligible for a formula-based reimbursement of 76.68%. If funding for this phase is authorized Special Town Meeting, we expect to receive MSBA approval in February 2027. The reimbursement rate will be recalculated then based on updated demographics, but the change is generally negligible on a year to year basis.

For.Construction¿..The same demography-based rate would apply to eligible construction costs, with potential bonus points awarded if design and construction plans include incentivized elements, which may include re-use of existing facilities, green buildings, and other features. However, it is important to note that choices made during the design process are central to determining the effective reimbursement rate, as there are caps or exclusions for cost/ft^2, square footage for each type of space, site work and hazardous materials, etcetera. For this reason, construction reimbursement is almost always lower than the base rate suggests. Value engineering is essential to maximize program reimbursement.

Why does this cost so much and do we expect to spend it all?

The proposed feasibility study authorization requests $1.75M and if we were to spend that full authorization the Town's net cost would be about $408,000; but it is our goal not to spend that much. The number is a figure that is considered advisable based on feedback from MSBA and research conducted by the Town Administrator's office, based on generally comparable , recent studies. We will work to manage our costs by presenting a clear and focused scope of study and by not asking the consultants to invest in options we do not collectively believe are viable.

The MSBA sets strict, non-negotiable state standards for what this multi-phase study must cover. This vote allows the Town to purchase the project management, engineering, architectural, cost estimation, and MSBA process management expertise that our town needs. It lets us explore options such as those laid out above – including building repairs, renovation, or new construction – so we can make the best decision for our community. Per MSBA, this phase alone can take up to 2.5 years, though we would hope to complete it in 18 months.

A preliminary estimate suggests the $1.75M would allow for up to $400,000 in OPM fees, $1.2M in architect and design fees, and $100,000 in site testing to ensure against the presence of hazardous materials issues on any site we choose to develop.

Where are our elementary schools today and what is student enrollment? What do trends say enrollment will be in ten years?

Latest numbers show a total current enrollment of 129 students at Hillcrest (PreK – Grade 1) and 176 at Sheffield (grades 2 – 5) for a total of 305. Both buildings lack sufficient space for programs and capital and accessibility issues are elsewhere documented. 10-year MSBA enrollment projections are under development, with initial estimates accounting for 260 students in grades K-5, plus accommodation for our pre-school program, which today would add 30 students, bringing that total to 290 students. Enrollment factors into MSBA's square footage reimbursement caps.

Note that MSBA does not include pre-K students in its projections because districts have discretion in the implementation of these programs making them variable across districts and over time. They do acknowledge them in building design, relying on the school's educational program plan, similar to how they account for specialized service classrooms and spaces. Unlike enrollment driven square foot reimbursement standards for standard classrooms, these spaces are included as reimbursable based on analysis of the educational program plan.

Satellite imagery of the campus view of the Hillcrest-Sheffield-Administrative campus



Can we move all the kids into the TFHS/GFMS building? And, if we build a new school, should it go on the middle-high school campus?

This would seem like an elegant solution, though preliminary school department discussions revealed some potential weaknesses of locating elementary school students at this location. While substantial engagement of the school parent community would be required, the Feasibility Study can answer the question of how this could be accomplished and at what cost. Making spaces suitable for very young children would require substantial redevelopment of portions of the building, new outdoor facilities and other changes.

These options are likely to be considered in the alternatives analysis, as they would at minimum answer important questions re feasibility. Note that athletic facilities place some constraints on the campus, which appears below. We will learn more about this option through study.

