

Date: March 17, 2015  
To: Maynard Coolidge School Reuse Task Force  
From: Angus Jennings, AICP  
RE: Summary of February 28, 2015 Public Forum

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## **Introduction**

This memo is intended to summarize the Public Forum held by the Coolidge School Task Force on February 28, and is intended to support the work of the Task Force as it moves forward with its charge. The memo includes a summary of each section of the Forum, and concludes with some thoughts and recommendations which may be helpful going forward.

## **Background**

Designed and built as a single story school in the classic revival tradition, with a second story later added, the Coolidge School building is an important part of Maynard's educational history. Thousands of Maynard children were educated in this school when neighborhood schools were the core of the Maynard educational system. It is therefore unique in its history and its architecture. In December 2014, the Maynard Public Schools' Administrative offices vacated the Coolidge School. It is proposed to transfer ownership of the property to the Town at the May 2015 Town Meeting.

On January 6, 2015 the Maynard Board of Selectmen unanimously appointed a Coolidge School Re-use Task Force. The Task Force's mission is to:

- ◊ Expediently examine the alternatives available to return the Coolidge School building and property to productive use;
- ◊ Identify and propose solutions to any issues that must be addressed in the process;
- ◊ Recognize in the process the request of the Historical Commission that the building be preserved;
- ◊ Report one or more recommended courses of action to Board of Selectmen no later than June 30<sup>th</sup> 2015.

## **Public Forum**

On February 28, 2015, the Task Force held a public forum at the Maynard Public Library to let the public know about the Task Force's mission and process and invite citizen involvement. The Public Forum was advertised with articles on February 15 and February 26 in the Maynard-Stow Beacon-Villager, through email announcements to Town Committees, Maynard residents and others by the Task Force members, and a flyer posted in prominent locations in Maynard.

Approximately fifty individuals attended the Forum, including Task Force members. The Forum included presentations, brainstorming, and attendee polling on several questions intended to provide the Task Force with direction regarding public preferences and priorities. Toward the conclusion of the Forum, attendees participated in an interactive open house to discuss issues and potential solutions.

The Task Force provided materials for view such as:

- 2008 Coolidge School Building Assessment by Tappé Associates,
- A brief history and description of the property,
- Blueprints and interior photos for all three floors of the building,
- Historic images of the School,
- Poster-sized zoning maps,
- Poster-sized satellite and oblique images of the site and the neighborhood.

Participants were led through the agenda (attached).

### **Who's Here, Who's Not?**

As a warm up, the lead facilitator led an exercise to better understand the make-up of the participants. Participants self-identified as members of particular groups through a show of hands. This was done to help facilitators and participants understand what knowledge they brought to the Public Forum and to suggest stakeholder groups that weren't represented but should be contacted to participate in the process as it moves forward.

48 attendees, including Task Force participants, were counted during the exercise. Facilitators did not create an exact tally of votes, but did make rough estimates.

<b>Question</b>	<b>Approximate Percent</b>
Within a "5 minute walk" of Coolidge School	30%
Are you from Maynard, but outside a "5 minute walk" of Coolidge School?	60%
Are you from outside of Maynard?	10%
Do you have personal knowledge or a connection to the Coolidge School Building, for example, attended when it was a school?	50%
Do you work in Maynard?	30%
Are you town staff or serve on Town boards or committees?	25%
Are you under 30 years old?	10%

In addition, facilitators asked audience members what stakeholder groups might be interested in the Coolidge School Re-Use Task Force's mission but were underrepresented at the Public Forum. Three groups were mentioned aloud or in comments:

- ◇ Boys and Girls Club
- ◇ Elementary and High School Students
- ◇ Parents with Small Children

## **Background and Context**

Jack MacKeen, Economic Development Committee Representative on the Task Force, spoke regarding the objectives of the Public Forum, the history and reason for the Task Force, and background regarding the building itself. Key points mentioned included:

- ◇ The School Department vacated the Coolidge School and intends to declare the property surplus and convey it to the Town;
- ◇ The Board of Selectmen voted unanimously to create a Re-use Task Force with a charge to make recommendations on returning the property to productive use;
- ◇ The Task Force will make recommendations to the Board of Selectmen, but the Board of Selectmen will make the final decision on which path to pursue;
- ◇ However, some courses of action that may be determined by the Board of Selectmen would require approval at Town Meeting;
- ◇ No decisions have been made or would be made at the Public Forum, but public input gathered would be part of the Task Force's decision-making process;
- ◇ The public is invited to all Task Force meetings, which are posted and open to the public;
- ◇ A 2008 report identified \$2 million of necessary repairs, none of which have been made, and it is estimated that the cost to bring the property up to code compliance for certain uses (including sprinkler systems, elevator, and other accessibility work) could be quite a bit more;
- ◇ The building is otherwise structurally sound.

Andrew Scribner-MacLean, Assistant Town Administrator was invited to discuss the Town-wide funding context in which decisions must to made. Key points mentioned included:

- ◇ Although the Town's tax rate is high, the average tax burden on property owners is in-line with other towns because of lower property values relative to neighboring towns;
- ◇ Approximately 10% of the Town's budget is on capital improvements, most of which is debt service and higher than town averages;
- ◇ Much of the debt burden is a result of recent school construction and improvements. The proportion of capital costs as a percentage of the budget can be expected to decrease as debt is paid off over time;
- ◇ There is a capital plan in place for repair of current town facilities, but if the Town were to acquire additional property, additional maintenance would be required for that property.

Both presentations included time for the audience to ask questions.

## Community Needs and Strengths

The facilitators then invited participants to “take a step back” from the Coolidge School and brainstorm Maynard’s strengths and needs more generally. These strengths and needs were recorded on flip charts. Later in the Public Forum, participants were given three sticky-dots and could “vote” by placing the dots next to the needs they felt were most pressing. Participants were allowed to use all dots on a single need or spread the dots to two or three needs.

The exercise was intended to help the participants and Task Force put the Coolidge School into a broader context before thinking of potential uses for the site. The voting exercise encouraged participants to weigh the relative importance of different needs. Facilitators emphasized that the brainstorming and voting at this stage of the Forum should focus on the community context, not whether the Coolidge School site could meet any particular need.



### Strengths

Community Strengths that resulted from the brainstorming exercise are listed in the table below in alphabetical order. Common themes were Maynard’s natural features; downtown attractions and vibrancy; walkability; nonprofits and community services; sense of community; focus on education, arts, and creativity; and socioeconomic diversity.

Affordability and Socioeconomic Diversity	Food Pantry	Movie Theater
Artspace	Friendliness	Open Table Food Pantry/Kitchen
Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge	Full Day Kindergarten	Other Natural Features (i.e. Ice House Pond)
Boys and Girls Club	Golf Course	Other Parks and Playgrounds (i.e. Reo Road)
Coolidge Playground	Great Senior Community	Rail Trail
Creative Community	Immersion Program	Restaurants
Critical Mass for a Food Co-Op	Library	Schools
Crosstown Connect (Paratransit)	Maplebrook Park	Sense of Community
Downtown Merchant Group	Maynard Community Band	Small Businesses
Electric Charging Station	Meals on Wheels	Vibrant Downtown
English as a Second Language and Adult Education Classes	Mill Buildings	Walkability
Farmers Market	Mill Pond and River	WAVM Radio

## Needs

Community Needs that resulted from the brainstorming exercise are listed in the table below in order of votes received. It should be noted that some needs and vote totals could be combined (such as Higher Quality, Mixed-Income Housing and More Scattered Affordable Housing), but are presented as organized at the Forum. (It should also be noted that each identified "need" is there because it was raised in the first place; therefore even those "needs" with zero votes can be understood as important to at least one attendee).

Common themes included services and housing for seniors; additional space for groups, nonprofits, and community services; affordable housing more generally; and some businesses such as grocery store, evening entertainment, and hotel.

Need	Votes
Maintain Walkability	11
Additional Town Revenue Streams	9
Growing Senior Population	9
Assisted Living	9
Mill Building Occupancy	8
Fire Stations	7
Historical Society Collection Space with Public Access	7
Hotel	4
Permanent Space for School Administration	3
Large Performance Space	2
Grocery Store	2
Higher Quality, Mixed-Income Housing	2
Public Meeting Space	2
Recreation and Indoor Sports	1
Boys and Girls Club Space	1
Food Co-op Space	1
Downtown Parking	1
Evening Entertainment (i.e. Music Venue)	1
Kitchen for Senior Center	1
More Scattered Affordable Housing	1
Improved Gateway into Maynard	1
Visitor Center	1
Community Gardens	0
Downtown Restrooms	0
Young People Looking for Housing	0

## Review of Options, Re-Use Preference Votes

After discussing the community at large, the Facilitators reviewed a continuum of options available to the Town for the Coolidge School site. These included:

- ◇ Separating the existing playground from the building, creating two separate parcels
- ◇ Maintaining public ownership and use (Example: Conversion of Roosevelt School into Library)
- ◇ Maintaining public ownership, but leasing the space to a private entity (Example: Artspace)
- ◇ Selling the building to a private entity with deed restrictions
- ◇ Selling the building to a private entity with conditions imposed as part of the transfer or property
- ◇ Selling the building without conditions, but with reuse/redevelopment subject to zoning



Participants were then invited to vote by show of hands on several questions. Facilitators verbally listed and displayed all choices via a projector before inviting participants to vote. Facilitators emphasized that the questions were about the building itself, not the playground. In addition, facilitators emphasized that the vote was not scientific, but rather to “take the pulse of the room.”

The questions and results are listed in the table below.

Question	Choice	% Vote	# Responses
Is historic preservation of the Coolidge School important?	Historic preservation of the school is of the utmost importance	56%	32
	I believe preservation of the school should only be pursued if cost-neutral for town	28%	
	Preservation of the school is not important to me	6%	
	Not Sure	9%	
Is it important for the public to have access to the inside of the school?	The Town should attempt to restore the interior of the school to a use that is accessible by public	50%	34
	My sole preservation concern is the exterior façade	35%	
	Preservation of the school building is not important to me	6%	
	Not Sure	9%	
If the playground could be separated from the school, should the building use be public?	I would be okay with the building being sold if the playground can maintain public use	50%	34
	Both the building and the playground should maintain in public use	35%	
	The playground does not need to maintain public use	0%	
	Not Sure	15%	
Is public use of the school building important?	It is important to me that the building stay in public ownership	0%	34
	It is important to me that the building serves the public in some way, but could be owned or managed by a private entity	79%	
	This is not important to me	15%	
	Not Sure	6%	
If you could only have one, which is more important to you?	Community use of the school is more important to me	34%	35
	Historic preservation of the school is more important to me	34%	
	Neither is important to me	3%	
	Not Sure	29%	

### Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats Analysis

Facilitators then led participants through an exercise to brainstorm strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to potential re-use of the site (as opposed to the Town-wide exercise earlier in the program). Strengths and Weaknesses tend to be internal to the site, while Opportunities and Threats tend to be external to the site, often represented as trends or “costs of doing nothing.”

The goal of the exercise was to develop a list of challenges or barriers to the community's goals along with suggesting ways to overcome those challenges, taking into account the town-wide context. A comprehensive list of strengths can be used to suggest ways to take advantage of opportunities and mitigate threats. A comprehensive list of weaknesses suggests challenges that may get in the way of opportunities or make the site susceptible to threats. The exercise only "scratches the surface," and facilitators made clear that a SWOT evaluation, in some form, will continue to be part of the Task Force's considerations throughout its work.

Later in the Public Forum, participants were given three sticky-dots, similar to the Strengths and Needs exercise. This time, they were invited to "vote" by placing the dots next to the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats they thought best described the site and its context. Participants were allowed to use all dots on a single item or spread the dots to two or three items.

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are listed in the table below in order of votes received:

<b>Strength</b>	<b>Votes</b>	<b>Weakness</b>	<b>Votes</b>
Publicly accessible open space	13	Neighborhood adverse to traffic impacts	2
Among few preserved historic public buildings	9	Zoned residential	1
Structural soundness	7	Lack of visibility	0
2.5 acre site - large currently town-owned parcel	3	Difficult for people from out of town to access	0
Existing public multi-use space	3	Limited parking available	0
Surrounded by neighborhood	2	Slope of site	0
Visual distinctiveness	1	Not currently listed on National Register (Historic credits unavailable unless listed)	0
Building designed for public access	0		
Historic status of schools	0		
Not currently listed on National Register	0		
Safe walk (Less traffic)	0		

Opportunities	Votes	Threat	Votes
Potential for public classes (art, etc)	8	Potential Demolition	3
Can provide tax revenue and sale revenue for town	5	Short-term focus on budget	3
Potential for multigenerational uses	5	Time (Deterioration)	0
Building near playground/users of building can be near children	3	Cost of development might be prohibitive	0
Seniors don't need parking	3	Encumbrance may impact value	0
Potential ability to expand building while maintaining historic integrity	3		
Some developers may be OK with conditions; careful appraisal needed	2		
Town of Immigrants	1		
Massachusetts Cultural Council capital program availability	1		
Newer buildings do not have architectural details/structural soundness as often	0		
Eligible for historic preservation credits (needs designation as "historic")	0		
Community Preservation Act availability	0		
Daycare and other uses allowed in residential zone	0		

## Open House and Wrap-Up

The final portion of the Public Forum was organized as an open house in which participants were invited to attend the following interactive stations:

- ◇ **Adaptive Reuse and Preservation Issues** with Jack MacKeen, Tim Hess and Rick Lefferts
- ◇ **Community Needs** with Lee Acker, Ken Neuhauser and Vicki Brown Stevens
- ◇ **Capital Planning and Town-wide Context** with Andrew Scribner-MacLean and Sally Bubier
- ◇ **Disposition Options** with Angus Jennings

Participants were invited to visit each station to talk to Task Force members and community experts about issues particular to that station. The intent of this portion of the program was to invite participants to talk in more detail about particular issues than may have been feasible in the larger group setting.

At the end of the Open House, the facilitators of each table reported what was discussed. Common themes included questions about the assessed value and the impact certain actions would have on the assessed value, the potential for using the ground floor as a community use and having the other floors as private uses, and questions about how the Town could dispose of the property but maintain preservation standards.



### Comment Cards

Participants were also invited to leave comment cards about the Coolidge School or about the process. Six cards were received:

- ◇ Needs: Publicity/town publicist  
Places for kids/teenagers to hang out, we don't have bowling, skating, etc  
Department store shopping – ex: Target, Walmart (Nearest shopping is 20-30 min away)  
I think for Coolidge 2 things are particularly important:
  - 1) Demo. Delay Bylaw
  - 2) Re-zoning or special exceptions to zoning to broaden usage possibilities, if the building were to be transferred to a private developer – great possibility for town revenue through commercial uses
- ◇ Community Needs  
Senior Housing: wrt/ affordability, appropriateness – where do elders fit in?  
Preserve older buildings
- ◇ Community Needs  
Open Space  
Community Center w/ kitchen  
Incubator space, start-up space
- ◇ Who's Not Here  
Parents with young kids are not in the room
- ◇ If the building stays for Public Use, I'd love to have a bathroom available to families using the playground. Thank you.
- ◇ What about a space for seniors that includes both residential space and community gathering space, something like a college dorm type setting – except for senior citizens?
- ◇ As a neighbor of the Coolidge Park and School and parent, I appreciate the updates to the playing fields a located on the grounds of Coolidge School. I would hope for a positive, economically-feasible plan for reuse and repurpose of the Coolidge School building as well. Some ideas are:

- Community center (in collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club and/or Parks and Recreation)
- Age-in-place housing apartments and/or condominiums (for seniors)
- ArtSpace2
- Satellite classroom space for community college or adult education classes
- A “Makerspace” (for example, see <http://www.bostonmakers.org/massdevelopment-massdevelopment-releases-first-look-at-makerspaces-in-massachusetts/>)

My hope is that the building remain and be updated as is necessary, however, that the grounds and fields remain a community park and

## Closing Thoughts

Overall, the Forum was well-attended, and resulted in many positive interactions among members of the community. The Task Force members did a great job getting the word out ahead of time, and there is clearly a great deal of interest in the building, and those in attendance seemed glad for the opportunity to participate.

As one of the facilitators, here are a few of my takeaways:

- ◇ It was striking that, during the polling, not a single attendee felt that it was important for the building to remain in public **ownership**, although nearly 4 out of 5 attendees did feel that it’s important for the building to provide some public benefit.
- ◇ The Task Force has wrestled with the question of what constitutes a public benefit. While community-oriented uses clearly fall into this category, I would suggest that uses such as senior housing, affordable housing and/or veterans’ housing – though they would serve a small subset of the community – do offer public benefits. One way I think about this question is to consider: would the use be created through the normal operations of private industry, in the absence of public action? If not, and if there is a demonstrated need for the use, then I feel it should be considered a public benefit.
- ◇ Based on responses to polling, it seems to me that attendees consider the building and the grounds as one, and that if the grounds remain open to the public for recreational uses, that this would go a long way toward satisfying peoples’ interest that the site offer a public benefit.
- ◇ Based on my experience working with other communities on the disposition of public properties, I would advise that, if the Town does move toward property disposition (either “fee simple” or disposition of rights to use of the property while the Town maintains ownership), it consider the following:
  - The more information can be provided to prospective respondents regarding the condition of the building and grounds, and the identified needs for investment in order to bring the property into code compliance, the better. There is a great deal of information on file through the Tappe Report and the portion of the Town-wide facilities report relating to this property, and it’s my understanding that the Building

Commissioner has recently toured the building. The more that the Town can do to organize and coalesce this information, the better. This will allow respondents, each working with the same information, to prepare the most accurate estimates possible regarding their anticipated costs – and their costs have direct bearing on what they could offer the Town for ownership of (or rights to) the property.

- A well-organized bid document can also be expected to broaden the number of prospective respondents. All time and resources that a respondent puts toward this building are “at risk,” and some respondents will shy away from a process that does not appear to be well organized, or where they hear conflicting information (such as regarding the condition of the building). Including the Building Commissioner and the Board of Health in this process will be important, since these offices will be responsible for determining whether a reuse/redevelopment is code compliant.
- In general, the Town’s effort toward preparing an RFP/RFQ should be organized toward identifying questions that prospective bidders are likely to have, and providing answers to those questions within the procurement. Costs that a prospective renovation/redevelopment would incur – whether zoning approvals, public utility connection fees etc., should be identified up front, so these can be accurately accounted for within respondents’ proposals.

