

**TOWN OF WILLINGTON  
SPECIAL TOWN MEETING MINUTES  
MARCH 14, 2023**

A special Town Meeting of the electors and citizens qualified to vote in town meetings of the Town of Willington, Connecticut, was held at Hall Memorial School, 111 River Road, Willington, Connecticut on the Tuesday, of March 14, 2023 at 7:00 PM was called to order by First Selectwoman Erika Wiecenski.

**John Tehan moved to nominate Suzanne Chapman as moderator, seconded by Michelle Doucette-Cunningham.**

**Vote taken: All in favor 0 No 0 Abstain**

Moderator then went over housekeeping items noting the purpose of the meeting is to discuss and seek clarification on the 2 resolutions presented in the call. She then clarified that we will not be voting on these resolutions this evening. This meeting will be adjourned to Referendum. Moderator then stated that she understands there are many issues surrounding the resolutions but asked everyone to keep their comments towards the items being discussed. All questions and comments should be made to the Moderator and not to members of the audience. The Superintendent, Phil Stevens has agreed to answer questions related to the Board of Education and Michael Makuch has agreed to answer questions regarding the School Building Committee, as Chairman.

Speakers were allotted 2 minutes to speak and were required to sign up prior to speaking on each item.

Robin Campbell acted as clerk. The Clerk then read the notice for the meeting which was published in The Chronicle on March 9, 2023, and which is recorded in these records immediately preceding these minutes.

Moderator stated that since the Selectmen of the Town on their own initiative, pursuant to Section 7-7 of the General Statutes of Connecticut, had designated items 1 and 2 in the notice of meeting for submission to the voters in the manner provided by said Section, it will be necessary to order a referendum on the resolutions and adjourn this meeting after a reasonable discussion.

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**Item 1.**

Moderator presented the report of the Board of Finance recommending an appropriation and borrowing authorization of \$62,740,000 for the PK-8 School Project.

Moderator presented the report of the Planning and Zoning Commission approving the proposed PK-8 School Project and Auditorium pursuant to Section 8-24 of the General Statutes of Connecticut.

Moderator then re-read the resolution for ITEM 1:

RESOLUTION APPROPRIATING \$62,740,000 TO FUND THE COSTS RELATED TO THE DESIGN, ACQUISITION, CONSTRUCTION, EQUIPPING AND FURNISHING OF A NEW APPROXIMATELY 76,680 SQUARE FOOT PRE-K THROUGH GRADE 8 SCHOOL TO BE CENTRALLY LOCATED WITHIN THE TOWN, INCLUDING THE ACQUISITION OF LAND AND/OR RIGHTS OR INTERESTS IN LAND ON WHICH TO LOCATE THE NEW SCHOOL, AND AUTHORIZING THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS AND NOTES OF THE TOWN IN AN

AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$62,740,000 TO FINANCE THE APPROPRIATION OR SO MUCH AS MAY BE NECESSARY AFTER DEDUCTING GRANTS TO BE RECEIVED FOR THE PROJECT

The Moderator then opened discussion of the foregoing resolution in Item I

John Tehan asked for clarification regarding the lot in which the new school would be located.

Moderator noted that it was not an item on the call; it denotes "acquisition of a parcel of land to be centrally located; it does not specify a specific parcel.

SBC Chairman Makuch then offered clarification on how the selection process was handled. He noted that a Land sub-committee was created within the School Building Committee, and they were looking at 2 tracts of land at the time. One was to see if reconstruction was feasible on site or build new. The Land Assessment sub-committee began the search for properties along with the consultant, who developed a list of properties in town that would fit the scope. The list was compiled in March 2022 based off of zoning information, which made a list of 127 possible parcels that fit the criteria. Last summer, the list was whittled down through the process of projective evaluation such as the location, neighboring properties, slope, ledge, size, wetlands, etc. The list was narrowed down more and more to get to four parcels. The final four parcels were then rated by the SBC with a purely objective point system evaluation. There was no collusion. Mr. Makuch then noted that all the parcels that were under review are available to the public through the SBC meeting minutes.

Michelle Doucette-Cunningham stated she currently sits on the Board of Education as chairman but is here tonight as a citizen, noting the BOE has been discussing what to do with the schools for more than ten years. There is an obvious dollar amount attached to a "yes vote" and are aware of reimbursements from the state, but what is the dollar amount in the event of a "no vote"?

SBC Chairman Makuch answered the question, noting that there has been a lot of discussion for the yes votes but clarified that a no vote does not automatically commit to something else. He added that the information that has been released to the public is about \$19 million (after reimbursement) from the state; which also includes maintenance and upkeep on 2 buildings. He added that we will not see the \$500,000 reduction in operating expenses. There would also be ongoing work and unknown costs associated with the 2 existing buildings.

Superintendent Stevens added that the \$19 million figure is also based on the assumption that all of the projects could be done at once – which is probably not feasible. There would be additional costs when bonding.

Matt Clark stated that he does not think the 37% reimbursement is high enough and it is not fair; noting some towns around us have gotten 65%; 75%. He added that the proposed school is 30% bigger than the state allows and also noted that the SBC did not include road widening and contingencies in the plan. He urged everyone to vote no.

Peter Latincsics stated he is a member of the School Building Committee. He has asked himself three questions. 1) who are we? We are the people of Willington when the time this structure was built, the people always enthusiastically supported education in this town; but he now sees a change. 2) where are we? The School Building Committee has been meeting for two and a half years, and have learned those before us have done a pretty good job with the two buildings we have. It seems difficult taking 2 buildings and squeezing them into one and still have all of the space we need. Researching the 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking, we have found that the 20<sup>th</sup> century people were pretty much on the ball. Lastly, 3) where do we go from here? This is a very different time. We need creative solutions and are being asked to pass it without knowing what is in it.



Matthew Pelletier stated this whole process started because of a recommendation from a state official working in DAS, who is now under criminal investigation from the FBI and Federal grand jury. Have we considered that we could be opening ourselves up to being part of the Federal investigation because of his own personal gain?

Laurie Semprebson stated that she served on the Board of Education in 2008 and back then, they were having discussions on what to do with the schools. We hope the costs will come in at \$29 million or less for new. The cost to refurbish will come in at \$19 million and additional costs of \$500,000 per year to manage 2 schools. At 20 years, both scenarios will cost the same, but the first would be that we have a 20 year old building and the second is we will have 2 very old buildings and pay \$500,000 more in operating costs per year. What happened to society wanting what works best for everyone? It is the responsibility for us to provide for the future. We have dealt with this echo-chamber during concerts and plays for years. It would be really nice to have a new auditorium

Sam McGill stated he has been in town for 11 years he has worked on this school and center school over the years. He stated when working on an old building, you don't know once you start repairing. He added the way we always looked at it in our household – somebody paid for our children's education and we would pass it on.

Nicholas Tella stated he believes the kids deserve the best learning environment that is within reason. He added his opinions are pretty well known with the Board of Selectmen, the SBC and many in town. Taxes being raised with the proposed school has a major impact on the increase; which is troubling to many people in town. The SBC calculated data is not taking the whole picture in regards to government spending. Hall School was appraised at \$7.6 million in 2018, he is confident that in 1949, when discussion started about donating HMS to the town, the building was not \$7.6 million at the time.

Orlando Rodriguez stated that he wanted to clarify that we have no say on the percentage we get from the state for reimbursements. If you are unhappy with the amount we receive, please talk with your legislators. Also there are bills in legislature right now having to do with green construction – so we might be able to get more from the state. Mr. Rodriguez then clarified that the DAS official is being investigated and under indictment for existing construction and has nothing to do with our situation.

John Blessington complained about the format of this meeting. Normally, when we have a town meeting as involved as this, we would hold a public hearing so the people could make their positions known. We were told we don't need that because people will be able to speak up at the Town meeting. Here we are at the Town Meeting, and we had 2 speakers so far who never even got into what they were saying before their 2 minutes were up. We really should have a public hearing before take this to vote.

Moderator clarified the protocol of recent Town Meetings allow a 2 minute window for people to speak. She added that it also happens at some meetings of boards and commissions in town as well.

Linda Miner stated that the proposed location is not centrally located as depicted on the call. She added holding this meeting during Storm Brenda has limited the number of people that are able to attend and it is not fair to the taxpayers. Ms. Miner noted that people move here to enjoy the schools and low taxes. If this project passes, it may drive business and taxpayers away.

Arthur Christensen stated he had a 3-page speech prepared for tonight's meeting; but will just take a quick second to say that everyone has different opinions about this. They either like it or they don't. They want to move for it or they don't. All you have to remember is that we are neighbors in this town. Treat each other with respect, no matter what their opinion is - especially if it is different than yours.

Moderator noted if anyone did not have enough of an opportunity to express their concerns – or if they have questions, they may contact the school building by email at: [SBC@Willingtonct.org](mailto:SBC@Willingtonct.org)



There were no further comments. Moderator then closed discussion on Item I.

**Item 2:**

Moderator presented the report of the Board of Finance recommending an additional appropriation and borrowing authorization of \$5,935,000 for the Auditorium Project.

Moderator then re-read Item II

RESOLUTION APPROPRIATING AN ADDITIONAL \$5,935,000 IF THE NEW PRE-K THROUGH GRADE 8 SCHOOL IS APPROVED TO FUND THE COSTS RELATED TO THE DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION, EQUIPPING AND FURNISHING OF AN APPROXIMATELY 8,000 SQUARE FOOT AUDITORIUM AT SUCH NEW SCHOOL, AND AUTHORIZING THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS AND NOTES OF THE TOWN IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$5,935,000 TO FINANCE THE APPROPRIATION OR SO MUCH AS MAY BE NECESSARY AFTER DEDUCTING GRANTS TO BE RECEIVED FOR THE PROJECT

The Moderator then opened discussion of the foregoing resolution in Item II:

Nicholas Tella began speaking about the land LOI. Moderator interrupted to clarify that we are discussing item II in regard to appropriating additional funds to build an auditorium.

Peter Tanaka stated that an auditorium is a big ask and noted that we have other things in town that may be considered more important. We need a number of things in this town for our life-saving Fire Department; who just found out their building is uninhabitable and the cost to replace their building will cost approximately \$3 million. We cannot be spending all of our money on 409 students.

Stef Summers stated that she is speaking in support of an auditorium, which is hinged on the new school. Having sung in a lot of community choruses with different groups, you lose something in the shuffle, such as scheduling and strong audio in a gymnasium or cafeteria. Our kids have demonstrated talent and they deserve to have an opportunity to strut their stuff – it would also be good for the town.

Samantha Sperry agrees with others who have said we should have held a public hearing on this topic. There are a lot of emotions involved in big decisions like this and she appreciates hearing people speaking about this as it has given her different perspectives

Todd Bissonnette asked how can existing buildings that are currently being used have repairs that are going to cost \$19 million? He just sold a house that is 102 years old and he had people begging for it because it was made back in the day. You are supposed to maintain as you go. He then asked why would we want to spend this kind of money on an auditorium if we are not maintaining what we have now?

Superintendent Stevens answered and stated the numbers that are in the CIP is from the Friar report (which can be found online) and is part of the initial building study that was done in 2017 – it contains scenarios such as replacing full heating systems and full boiler systems and things like that. These things are all replacements; not repairs and all of these things were brought up to 2025 costs to compare to today's costs of the other buildings. The current items that are not in there currently are in the CIP as repairs from the Board of Education and they can be found online as well.

Tracy Webb asked how often will the auditorium be used?

Superintendent Stevens responded that there was a lot of discussion regarding the need for an auditorium because it is a big ask. One of the things when they built the ed-spec; was to design it so it could be used as a teaching space. You won't be able to utilize the chairs but the stage will be designed to be used as a music classroom. Instead of adding a classroom, they removed the music classroom so they could utilize the stage.

Ms. Webb then asked why wouldn't we just put sound – absorbing technology to make it sound like an auditorium so we could utilize the space for both purposes?

Superintendent Stevens stated if the first question passes and the second fails, we can design a gymnasium or a cafeteria where the systems would be built in rather than building the auditorium.

Laura Rodriguez stated that she is a mother of a child who attended HMS; she taught here at HMS for 12 years and has attended several concerts, plays, musicals and events here in the gym. It is not ideal. She voted to have the auditorium be added as a separate item because she felt the town needed to be able to vote on it separately. The school has been maintained well, but it is old. Lastly, Ms. Rodriguez stated that there have been at least a half a dozen public hearings on the school buildings where you could attend in person or on zoom so this is the last one where we can make our voices heard.

James Marshall asked if there are any potential impacts to education if the auditorium does not pass?

Superintendent Stevens said having an auditorium will let you expand outside that space. He noted at HMS has a classroom in back of the wall on the stage, where music class will be held at the same time where gym class is being held and there is no sound-proofing. He noted that they toured Birch Grove in Tolland where they have a similar design as what we have now, however the wall is sound proof and you couldn't hear what is going on the other side. Superintendent Stevens added that the loss is when you are trying to open something up while on stage and you want to have kids to be able to stay in the audience; you can't do that in a cafeteria setting.

There were no further comments.

Moderator then closed discussion on Item II.

### **Item 3:**

The Moderator declared that the town meeting was adjourned to a referendum vote on Tuesday, March 28, 2023, between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m., and that the resolutions under item 1 would be placed upon the ballots under the following heading:

“SHALL THE TOWN OF WILLINGTON APPROPRIATE \$62,740,000 TO FUND COSTS RELATED TO THE DESIGN, ACQUISITION, CONSTRUCTION, EQUIPPING AND FURNISHING OF A NEW PRE-K THROUGH GRADE 8 SCHOOL TO BE CENTRALLY LOCATED WITHIN THE TOWN, INCLUDING THE ACQUISITION OF LAND AND/OR RIGHTS OR INTERESTS IN LAND, AND AUTHORIZE THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS AND NOTES OF THE TOWN IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$62,740,000 TO FINANCE THE APPROPRIATION OR SO MUCH AS MAY BE NECESSARY AFTER DEDUCTING GRANTS TO BE RECEIVED FOR THE PROJECT?”



The resolution under item 2 will be placed on the ballot under the following heading:

“SHALL THE TOWN OF WILLINGTON APPROPRIATE AN ADDITIONAL \$5,935,000 IF THE NEW PRE-K THROUGH GRADE 8 SCHOOL IS APPROVED TO FUND THE COSTS RELATED TO THE DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION, EQUIPPING AND FURNISHING OF AN AUDITORIUM AT SUCH NEW SCHOOL, AND AUTHORIZING THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS AND NOTES OF THE TOWN IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$5,935,000 TO FINANCE THE APPROPRIATION OR SO MUCH AS MAY BE NECESSARY AFTER DEDUCTING GRANTS TO BE RECEIVED FOR THE PROJECT?”

Voters approving a resolution will vote “yes” and those opposing a resolution will vote “No”.

Electors and other people qualified to vote in town meetings who are not electors will vote at the following polling places:

Wilmington Town Office Building  
40 Old Farms Road  
Wilmington, Connecticut 06279

Absentee ballots will be available from the Town Clerk’s office.

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The Town meeting adjourned at 8:14 P.M. for a referendum vote on the resolutions under items 1 and 2.

Respectfully Submitted,

Robin H. Campbell

Town Clerk

Attachment: Warning of Town Meeting Adjourned to Referendum published in the Willimantic Chronicle on March 9, 2023

**LEGAL WARNING AND NOTICE  
TOWN OF WILLINGTON  
SPECIAL TOWN MEETING MARCH 14, 2023  
REFERENDUM MARCH 28, 2023**

A special town meeting of the electors and citizens qualified to vote in town meetings of the Town of Willington, Connecticut, will be held at 7:00 P.M. on Tuesday, March 14, 2023 at Hall Memorial School, 111 River Road, Willington, Connecticut, for the following purposes:

**Item 1.** To discuss and consider a resolution authorizing:

(a) an appropriation of \$62,740,000 to fund the costs related to of the design, acquisition, construction, equipping and furnishing of a new approximately 76,680 square foot Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8 school to be centrally located within the Town and related site improvements and work, including the acquisition of land and/or rights or interests in land on which to locate the new school (the "PK-8 School Project") and the issuance by the Town of its general obligation bonds or notes and temporary notes in an amount not to exceed \$62,740,000 to finance said appropriation or so much as may be necessary after deducting grants to be received for the Project;

(b) the First Selectman and the Treasurer to determine the amount, date, interest rates, maturities, form and other details of the bonds or notes and temporary notes and to enter into agreements to bind the Town with respect to the financing of the Project;

(c) the Willington School Building Committee (i) to determine the scope and particulars of the PK-8 School Project and, in collaboration with the Willington Board of Education, to reduce or modify the scope of the Project, and spend the entire amount of the appropriation on the Project as so reduced or modified, and (ii) to approve design and construction expenditures for the PK-8 School Project pursuant to project contracts, to contract with architects, engineers, contractors and others in the name and on behalf of the Town to complete the Project, and to exercise such other powers as are necessary or appropriate to complete the project;

(d) the Board of Education to apply for and accept or reject state grants for the PK-8 School Project and to execute grant agreements, and to take any other action necessary to obtain such grants or implement the terms of any grant agreements; and

(e) the First Selectman, the Treasurer, the Board of Education, the Willington School Building Committee and other proper officers of the Town to take all other action which is necessary or desirable to complete the PK-8 School Project, to issue bonds or notes and temporary notes and obtain grants to finance the appropriation.

**Item 2.** To discuss and consider a resolution authorizing:

(a) an additional appropriation of \$5,935,000 if the new Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8 school is approved by the Town to fund the costs related to the planning, design, construction, equipping and furnishing of an approximately 8,000 square foot auditorium at such new school (the "*Auditorium Project*") and the issuance by the Town of its general obligation bonds or notes and temporary notes in an amount not to exceed \$5,935,000 to finance said appropriation or so much as may be necessary after deducting grants to be received for the Project;

(b) the First Selectman and the Treasurer to determine the amount, date, interest rates, maturities, form and other details of the bonds or notes and temporary notes and to enter into agreements to bind the Town with respect to the financing of the Project;

(c) the Willington School Building Committee (i) to determine the scope and particulars of the Auditorium Project and, in collaboration with the Willington Board of Education, to reduce or modify the scope of the Project, and spend the entire amount of the appropriation on the Project as so reduced or modified, and (ii) to approve design and construction expenditures for the Auditorium Project pursuant to project contracts, to contract with architects, engineers, contractors and others in the name and on behalf of the Town to complete the Project, and to exercise such other powers as are necessary or appropriate to complete the Project;

(d) the Board of Education to apply for and accept or reject state grants for the Auditorium Project and to execute grant agreements, and to take any other action necessary to obtain such grants or implement the terms of any grant agreements; and



(e) the First Selectman, the Treasurer, the Board of Education, the Willington School Building Committee and other proper officers of the Town to take all other action which is necessary or desirable to complete the Auditorium Project, to issue bonds or notes and temporary notes and obtain grants to finance the appropriation.

**Item 3.** Pursuant to Section 7.7 of the General Statutes of Connecticut, Revision of 1958, as amended, to adjourn said town meeting at its conclusion and to submit the aforesaid resolutions contained in items 1 and 2 of the call of the meeting to a referendum vote on Tuesday, March 28, 2023, between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m.

The resolution under item 1 will be placed on the ballot under the following heading:

“SHALL THE TOWN OF WILLINGTON APPROPRIATE \$62,740,000 TO FUND COSTS RELATED TO THE DESIGN, ACQUISITION, CONSTRUCTION, EQUIPPING AND FURNISHING OF A NEW PRE-K THROUGH GRADE 8 SCHOOL TO BE CENTRALLY LOCATED WITHIN THE TOWN, INCLUDING THE ACQUISITION OF LAND AND/OR RIGHTS OR INTERESTS IN LAND, AND AUTHORIZE THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS AND NOTES OF THE TOWN IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$62,740,000 TO FINANCE THE APPROPRIATION OR SO MUCH AS MAY BE NECESSARY AFTER DEDUCTING GRANTS TO BE RECEIVED FOR THE PROJECT?”

The resolution under item 2 will be placed on the ballot under the following heading:

“SHALL THE TOWN OF WILLINGTON APPROPRIATE AN ADDITIONAL \$5,935,000 IF THE NEW PRE-K THROUGH GRADE 8 SCHOOL IS APPROVED TO FUND THE COSTS RELATED TO THE DESIGN, CONSTRUCTION, EQUIPPING AND FURNISHING OF AN AUDITORIUM AT SUCH NEW SCHOOL, AND AUTHORIZING THE ISSUANCE OF BONDS AND NOTES OF THE TOWN IN AN AMOUNT NOT TO EXCEED \$5,935,000 TO FINANCE THE APPROPRIATION OR SO MUCH AS MAY BE NECESSARY AFTER DEDUCTING GRANTS TO BE RECEIVED FOR THE PROJECT?”

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Willington Town Office Building  
40 Old Farms Road  
Willington, Connecticut 06279

Absentee ballots will be available from the Town Clerk’s office.

The complete text of each of the resolutions to be presented under Items 1 and 2 of this Notice is on file and available for public inspection at the Office of the Town Clerk.

Dated at Willington, Connecticut, this 27<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2023.

Willington Board of Selectmen:

Erika Wiecenski, Jim Bulick, Michael Makuch

Attest, Robin Campbell - Town Clerk

RECEIVED  
WILLINGTON, CT.

2023 MAR 20 P 6:15

  
TOWN CLERK