

A Closer Look at Amherst School Facilities: Balancing Educational Needs with Fiscal Responsibility



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Introduction:

As a candidate for The Amherst School Board, I wanted to share a detailed report of my perspective and findings regarding the Wilkins Project. I have spent several hundred hours reviewing information, attending meetings, watching videos, and speaking to community members as well as board members both past and present. I am also a concerned community member and parent. I have engaged the administration and toured the Wilkins School. I can say with certainty I believe we need a new facilities approach. One that ensures that our children have a safe and adequate learning environment and one where teachers, administration and staff can provide a world class education free of unnecessary distractions and lost educational time.

In this report I will express my reservations and observations regarding the current proposal for a new Wilkins School. I believe it is essential to engage in a comprehensive and transparent discussion about the most effective way to address our school facility needs while maintaining fiscal responsibility and ensuring the long-term sustainability of our educational system.

My Perspective:

My perspective is rooted in a deep commitment to our schools, our teachers, and finding solutions that benefit our students and community as a whole. I am pro-school, pro-teacher, and pro-solution, and I believe that by working together, we can find a path forward that will balance educational excellence with the financial well-being of our town.

Before delving into the specific issues, I want to emphasize that my intention is not to criticize the efforts of the school board, the administration, or any other stakeholders who have dedicated countless hours to addressing this complex challenge. I recognize and appreciate the commitment and hard work that has gone into exploring potential solutions. My aim is to foster a constructive dialogue, encourage a thorough examination of all available data and options, and ensure that our decisions are informed by sound financial principles, long-term planning, and a shared commitment to the best interests of our students and community.

I am however frustrated by the decision to present the same option two years in a row. This approach risks losing another year of progress towards an updated facilities approach. I do not believe that this plan is the most fiscally responsible option. I believe the high cost of this option will have long term impacts such as residents not passing warrant articles in the future including teacher contracts, capital needs such as fire trucks and other emergency vehicles.

Our teachers, administration and staff are what make our schools great, and we should continue to support them through the various contract negotiations we will have. Educational outcomes have increased due to the great work from our teachers. The framework for progress and now the framework for success is working based on the data. I look forward to the continued progress towards success and look forward to working with the administration on this goal.

Key Issues:

Declining Population and Enrollment Projections

Demographic Trends:

Data from the New Hampshire Department of Education reveals a concerning trend: the Amherst School District has experienced a decrease of 35 students between 2022 and 2024. Figure one and two show the two years of data I am referring to. This decline aligns with broader demographic projections indicating a continued decrease in both population growth and the percentage of children in our community. Figure three and figure four showcase a decrease in population growth and an aging population. These projections raise serious questions about the long-term sustainability of building a new school with a capacity for 864 students, which appears significantly larger than our current and anticipated needs.

New Hampshire Department of Education Division of Education Analytics and Resources Bureau of Educational Statistics 25 Hall Street, Concord, NH 03301									
2024 - 2025 District Fall Enrollments									
As of October 1, 2024									
SAU #	SAU Name	District #	District Name	PreSchool	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	High	Total
			State Totals	4,385	10,871	65,580	30,869	50,955	162,660
53	Pembroke	9	Allenstown	0	42	306	0	0	348
72	Alton	15	Alton	36	38	333	0	0	407
39	Amherst	17	Amherst	30	137	510	635	0	1,312

Figure 1 – Retrieved from

<https://my.doe.nh.gov/iPlatform/Report/Report?path=%2FBDMQ%2FiPlatform%20Reports%2FEnrollment%20Data%2FEnrollment%20Reports%2FDistrict%20Fall%20Enrollments&name=District%20Fall%20Enrollment&categoryName=Enrollment%20Reports&categoryId=9>

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2022 - 2023 District Fall Enrollments

As of October 1, 2022

SAU #	SAU Name	District #	District Name	PreSchool	Kindergarten	Elementary	Middle	High	Total
			State Totals	4,385	11,074	68,172	30,657	53,069	167,357
53	Pembroke	9	Allenstown	0	35	302	0	0	337
72	Alton	15	Alton	40	45	332	0	0	417
39	Amherst	17	Amherst	44	116	548	639	0	1,347

Figure 2 – Retrieved from

<https://my.doe.nh.gov/iPlatform/Report/Report?path=%2FBDMQ%2FiPlatform%20Reports%2FEnrollment%20Data%2FEnrollment%20Reports%2FDistrict%20Fall%20Enrollments&name=District%20Fall%20Enrollment&categoryName=Enrollment%20Reports&categoryId=9>

As of 2023, those aged 65 and older comprised about 20.8 percent of the population in New Hampshire. Despite a large number of young people moving into the state, New Hampshire’s population is aging faster compared to the nation overall. By 2030, the number of adults over age 65 in the state is expected to be larger than the number of children, according to the New Hampshire Department of Business and Economic Affairs.^[1]

Figure 3 – Retrieved from <https://nhfpi.org/resource/new-hampshires-growing-population-and-changing-demographics-before-and-since-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Table 12: Hillsborough County Projected Components of Change

	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050
Total Population	422,937	440,881	454,896	464,900	470,211	471,760	471,369
Population Change	x	17,944	14,015	10,004	5,311	1,549	-391
Total 5-year Births	x	23,227	23,672	23,150	22,218	21,466	21,505
Total 5-year Deaths	x	18,954	21,747	25,661	29,726	32,892	34,916
Natural Increase	x	4,273	1,925	-2,511	-7,508	-11,426	-13,411
Net Migration (5-year)	x	13,671	12,090	12,515	12,819	12,975	13,020
Female Population	212,368	220,927	227,825	232,888	235,771	236,862	236,984
Females Age 15 to 49	93,119	95,196	96,808	97,276	97,558	96,598	96,427

Figure 4 – Retrieved from <https://www.nheconomy.com/getmedia/0205c62d-9c30-4b00-9c9e-d81d8f17b8b3/NH-Population-Projections-2020-2050-Final-Report-092022.pdf>

Impact on Facility Needs:

While we must ensure adequate space and resources for our students, it is essential to consider the potential for underutilized capacity in a new, larger building. A smaller student population could lead to higher per-pupil costs and inefficient use of resources, ultimately impacting the educational experience and increasing the financial burden on taxpayers. Although the new building will use energy efficient building processes and systems it will be double the size and as such will cost more to run.

Financial Considerations and Cost Analysis

Cost Comparison:

The latest quote for a renovation and addition option is \$41,291,217, which is \$11,630,611 less than the current plan for a new building. This substantial cost difference represents a significant opportunity for savings that could be reinvested in other critical educational priorities, such as attracting and retaining high-quality teachers, reducing class sizes, or enhancing technology and curriculum resources. Figure five is a screenshot from the Amherst School Districts Wilkins Project Estimate Spreadsheet. Please note in google drive the column is hidden. My assumption is this was done to simplify the view of the option being presented. If you download the file, you can expand the columns.

	A	P	Q	R	S
1		Option 1 Owner Review #2	Sq/Ft Cost	Wilkins Option 2 DEWOwner Review 2023	11/12/2024
2				Sq/Ft 119,248	119248
99	Summary				
100	Hard Cost Sub-Total	\$34,288,011	\$306.45	\$40,770,527	\$43,929,800
101	Soft Cost Sub-Total	\$7,003,207	\$62.59	\$9,226,687	\$8,992,027
102	Grand Total	\$41,291,217	\$369.04	\$49,997,214	\$52,921,828
103	Total \$ in Contingencies	\$3,073,314	\$27.47	\$6,129,177	\$4,482,048

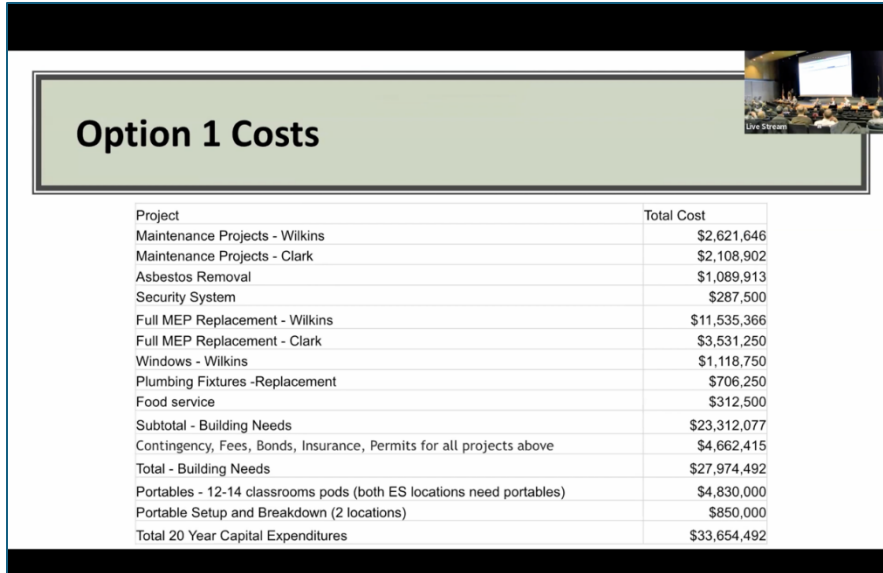
Figure 5 – Retrieved from https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Mv5cmP9ntr9HXMfGF_eJFNxRiQJ0BYRa_G4-B4XxfR0/edit?gid=1956697766#gid=1956697766

Status Quo Concerns:

The estimated cost of the "status quo" option, which involves maintaining and repairing existing facilities, is \$33 million. This figure raises several concerns:

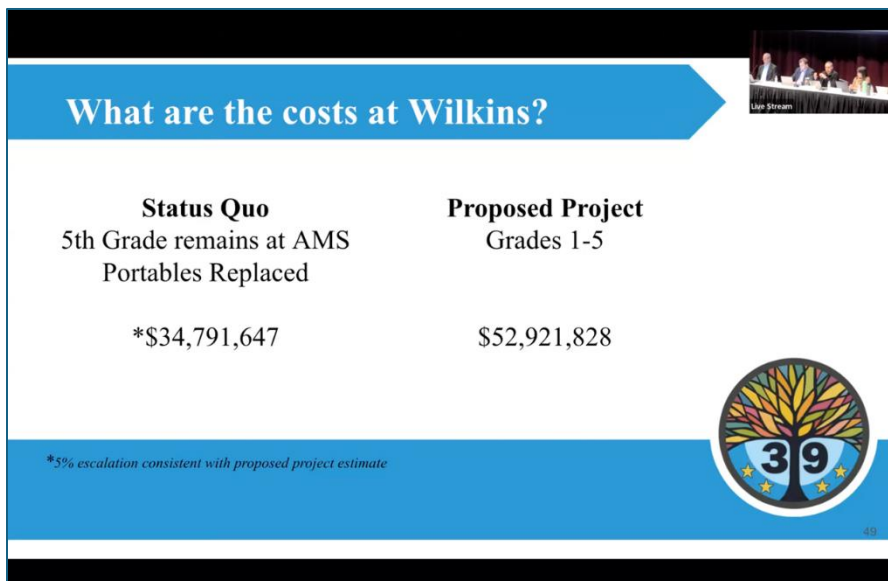
The \$33 million estimate is very close to the figure presented at the 2023 deliberative session, which included approximately \$11,615,000 for projects at Clark School. Figure six showcase the

2023 deliberative session number. However, it has been stated that the Clark projects are not included in the current "status quo" plan, raising questions about how the cost has remained so similar. Figure seven shows the 2025 deliberative session number. This discrepancy requires further clarification and a detailed breakdown of the scope of work included in the current "status quo" estimate.



Project	Total Cost
Maintenance Projects - Wilkins	\$2,621,646
Maintenance Projects - Clark	\$2,108,902
Asbestos Removal	\$1,089,913
Security System	\$287,500
Full MEP Replacement - Wilkins	\$11,535,366
Full MEP Replacement - Clark	\$3,531,250
Windows - Wilkins	\$1,118,750
Plumbing Fixtures -Replacement	\$706,250
Food service	\$312,500
Subtotal - Building Needs	\$23,312,077
Contingency, Fees, Bonds, Insurance, Permits for all projects above	\$4,662,415
Total - Building Needs	\$27,974,492
Portables - 12-14 classrooms pods (both ES locations need portables)	\$4,830,000
Portable Setup and Breakdown (2 locations)	\$850,000
Total 20 Year Capital Expenditures	\$33,654,492

Figure 6 – Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/0o-JDjFAjcw?si=D8-kbXg8cWMWiiLQ&t=4242>



Status Quo	Proposed Project
5th Grade remains at AMS	Grades 1-5
Portables Replaced	
*\$34,791,647	\$52,921,828

*5% escalation consistent with proposed project estimate




Figure 7 – Retrieved from https://youtu.be/lk7lYTXaLes?si=pLLHC7UNWCx5lpn_&t=2638

The "status quo" option reportedly includes a full mechanical, electrical, and plumbing replacement. However, the details of this extensive renovation and its associated costs have not been fully transparent, making it difficult to assess the value and long-term viability of this option. Figure eight shows the level of detail provided for the latest status quo estimate. A detailed scope of work, including specifications for the proposed replacements and upgrades, is necessary to evaluate the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of this approach. To make informed decisions about our school facilities, we need a comprehensive and transparent cost analysis of all available options. This analysis should include detailed breakdowns of construction costs, operating expenses, and potential long-term maintenance costs for each option. It should also consider the potential for cost escalation due to inflation and unforeseen circumstances.

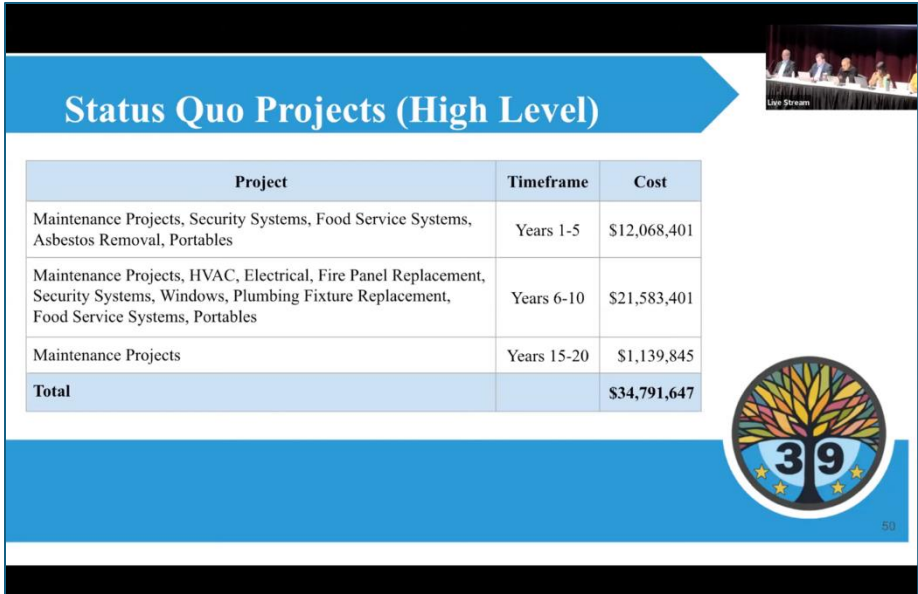


Figure 8 – Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/lk7lYTXaLes?si=Xt3aCNvVWRPwL3wO&t=2690>

Transparency, Community Engagement, and Long-Term Planning

Open Communication:

I believe it is essential to foster a culture of open communication and transparency throughout this process. This includes providing clear and accessible information about all aspects of the proposed project, including costs, timelines, and potential impacts on the community. It also means actively soliciting and responding to feedback from residents, parents, teachers, and other stakeholders. I believe the current board has attempted to do this.

Community Collaboration:

Addressing our school facility needs is not just the responsibility of the school board or the administration; it is a shared responsibility of the entire community. We must work together to find a solution that reflects the values and priorities of our town while ensuring the best possible educational outcomes for our children. I also believe voters should be able to vote on the option they most support. As an example, what I would have like to see this year is a warrant for the new build and in the case that did not pass a warrant for a renovation at the significantly discounted price tag. Not only would this present more options to voters I believe it would help us solve our facilities issues much more quickly than presenting single warrant articles each year.

Long-Term Fiscal Responsibility:

Our decisions about school facilities will have long-term financial implications for our town. We must consider not only the upfront costs of construction or renovation but also the ongoing operating and maintenance expenses associated with each option. It is crucial to ensure that our decisions are fiscally sustainable and do not jeopardize our ability to fund other essential services, such as teacher contracts, public safety, and infrastructure projects, in the future.

Conclusion:

I urge the school board, the administration, and the entire Amherst community to engage in a collaborative and data-driven process to determine the best course of action for our school facilities. We must prioritize transparency, fiscal responsibility, and long-term planning to ensure that our decisions reflect the needs and values of our community. By working together, we can find a solution that provides a safe, modern, and inspiring learning environment for our students while maintaining the financial health of our town.

Call to Action:

- I encourage all residents to review the available data, cost estimates, and project proposals.
- Ask questions, express your concerns, and participate in the public forums and discussions surrounding this important issue.
- Let's work together to find a solution that balances educational excellence with fiscal responsibility, ensuring a bright future for our students and our town.