

## Community Process for the Scope of the MSBA WHCIS Rebuild Draft Process and Protocols

### Overview

Since 2022, the City has been examining the needs around all of our school buildings. Among those efforts, a top priority is planning for our two oldest schools: the Benjamin G. Brown School and the Winter Hill Community Innovation School (WHCIS). To address these challenges, the City filed two Statements of Interest with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to seek state funding to renovate or rebuild these two buildings. The urgency of this need became even more apparent after the closure and relocation of WHCIS in 2023.

In December 2023, the MSBA notified Somerville that the Winter Hill was invited into the Eligibility phase of the MSBA process. Although the Brown School was not specifically accepted into the program, the MSBA expressed willingness to consider a single project that accommodates both the Winter Hill and Brown school populations.

Because this question has significant implications for the families in those areas, for the Somerville Public Schools, and for the City overall, the City has committed to a broad community process to allow Somerville parents / guardians, educators, and community members to meaningfully weigh in on three main questions:

- If we build a new school rather than renovate the old Winter Hill School, should the school be located at the Winter Hill site at Sycamore Street or elsewhere?
- Will the Brown School be included in a joint school, or, if not, how should we plan for the future of the Brown?
- What do these choices mean for the School Public Schools and City as a whole?

In April 2024, the City announced the creation of a School Building Committee to oversee the technical management of the school building process. The City also enlisted [the Consensus Building Institute](#) (CBI) to help design and implement a community engagement process to address the above main questions. CBI then convened a planning team made up of relevant City and SPS staff and began reaching out to key City and community stakeholders - including the City Council, School Committee, City and SPS staff, PTA leaders, the Chamber of Commerce, and other community leaders - for input on the design of the public process. Based on this input, the planning team has developed this Process and Protocols guide.

The community process is designed to coincide with the existing MSBA timeline, and will not impact the overall MSBA timeline nor the School Building Committee requirements

The community process includes two core components:

- 1) a School Construction Advisory Group (CAG), made up of representatives with a range of perspectives across the City, to deliberate on and recommend a path forward, and

2) a broad public process to outreach to and gather input from parents, guardians, teachers, and the community at large.

## **Somerville School Construction Advisory Group**

### **Scope and Mandate**

The Somerville School CAG will develop recommendations on the location and scope of a renovated or new school, which will be considered by the Mayor. As noted, this includes the following questions:

- If we build a new school rather than renovate the old Winter Hill School, should the school be located at the Winter Hill site at Sycamore Street or elsewhere?
- Will the Brown School be included in a joint school, or, if not, how should we plan for the future of the Brown?
- What do these choices mean for the School Public Schools and City as a whole?

To do this, the Advisory Group's job is to:

- include input from people with a broad range of perspectives and experiences from across the City
- build shared understanding about what the community wants, what the City and School District need, and what limits or issues they face
- help reach out to as many Somerville residents and families as possible, and listen to what they think is important through the Broad Public Process (see Broad Public Process description below)
- develop a range of effective and achievable options that meet the needs of the community, city, and school while following the MSBA process
- evaluate and narrow options based on community input and thoughtful deliberation, and;
- align on a best possible approach to bring to the Mayor and the School Building Committee (SBC) within the MSBA timeline.

### **Advisory Group Members:**

The Advisory Group is designed to collectively represent a broad range of perspectives and experiences across the City. Members are appointed by the Mayor, based on recommendations from appropriate parties, including the following categories:

- WHCIS, Brown School, and other SPS Parents/Guardians (selected via open call applications)
- Somerville School Committee (recommended by the School Committee Chair)
- Somerville City Council (recommended by the City Council President)
- Other community leaders who can add to the range of perspectives and/or help represent voices that might not otherwise be elevated (recommended by respective groups)

- Somerville business community (recommended by the Somerville Chamber of Commerce)
- SPS educators and students, if possible (recommended by Somerville Public Schools)

If not directly represented on the Advisory Group, the committee will seek targeted outreach to SPS educators and students.

All Members are expected to meet the following criteria:

- a) Capacity to represent the range of interests and concerns of the constituencies you represent, seek input from constituents, and communicate about the discussions and proceedings of the Advisory Group.
- b) Willingness and ability to attend monthly meetings, participate in additional working group meetings, read materials beforehand, listen to public and constituent views, and participate actively in discussions.
- c) Commitment to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue with other participants, keep an open mind, and seek effective options that respond to the interests of your own as well as other viewpoints.

### **Data and Information:**

To build understanding of the considerations, constraints, and impacts of potential recommendations, the Advisory Group will invite City staff to present data and information about relevant topics. Whenever possible, information and presentations will be shared prior to meetings where they will be discussed. Topics include (though are not limited to):

- a) Information about the culture, demographics, current conditions, enrollment, capacity, programs, space needs, curriculum requirements, and school and building programs at the Winter Hill Community Innovation School, the Brown School, and – as relevant – other district schools
- b) Community input collected via multiple methods by Winter Hill students, the Somerville Public Schools, and the broader community process
- c) Current and potential school travel and transportation information
- d) Overview of Somerville municipal finance, including:
  - operating budgets for daily business,
  - capital budgets for major projects planned over time,
  - revenue generation such as taxes or grants,
  - general fund capital needs for major investments planned per year,
  - sustainability goals for our school buildings,
  - affordability issues, and
  - how a debt exclusion override works (a ballot question to approve borrowing to fund a major project such as a school)
- e) Other City and School fiscal, infrastructure, and building priorities, including capital investments, logistics, etc.

Other experts may be invited to share their perspectives or knowledge, either at meetings or between meetings, if feasible and needed.

### **Decision Making**

- a) When deciding what to recommend to the Mayor, the Advisory Group will try to reach consensus. This means:
  - that everyone in the group agrees, or at least doesn't object strongly
  - members can choose to "abstain," which means they don't agree or disagree, but won't stop the group from moving forward
- b) If someone disagrees with an idea:
  - they should try hard to suggest a different idea that everyone likes
  - they shouldn't block agreement unless they have very strong reasons against the idea, which they can explain clearly
  - members should try to accept a final plan as a whole even if they're not happy with every single part of it
  - the group's main goal is to reach agreement, knowing that not everyone will be equally satisfied
- c) If the group can't agree on some parts, the final recommendation will include the majority view, but will clearly show which parts the group couldn't agree on. It will explain the different views fairly and accurately and include ideas suggested by members who disagreed.

### **Advisory Group Meetings**

- a) The Advisory Group expects to meet monthly in the early evenings at set dates and times, as well as at other dates and times as needed. Public meetings or tours may require more time and/or may take place during the day. Workshops, public forums, and informational meetings to broader constituencies will also be scheduled in coordination with Advisory Group members.
- b) Advisory Group meetings will be in person or virtual, depending on the needs of the agenda and the group. Meetings will be open to the public and posted in advance according to City norms. Discussion at the meetings will be primarily for members of the Advisory Group, though there will be a public comment period at the end of each meeting. Time for public comment will be limited so that the Advisory Group has time to do its work, but the public will also be able to share thoughts and opinions with the Advisory Group via email. Requests for ADA accommodations, interpretation and translation, and non-digital formats for feedback will be accepted, reviewed, and addressed appropriately.

- c) The facilitators will prepare summaries of each Advisory Group meeting for members to review and approve. The summaries will include main points of discussion, action items, points of tentative agreement, and next steps. All final summaries will be posted and shared with the public.

### **Safeguards and Ground Rules for Participation**

Everyone in the group agrees to the following:

- a) be polite, civil, and understanding
- b) treat others with respect
- c) do not attack people personally, call names, or spread false or private information about other members
- d) will not speak publicly on behalf of or characterize the input of other individual members (especially to the media) (reporters can review recordings)
- e) will not speak independently on behalf of the whole group to the media (reporters, websites, blogs, social media, or other public sharing of information) unless specifically tasked to do so (members are of course free to represent their own perspectives)
- f) will follow these rules in all communications about the group's work, both during meetings and outside of them
- g) speak honestly about the concerns and interests they represent
- h) work to make sure the group's recommendations are good for the whole City
- i) try to attend all scheduled meetings and activities
- j) come prepared, having read any documents sent out before the meeting
- k) be ready to discuss and stay focused on the topics on the agenda
- l) keep an open mind and be constructive
- m) try to help others understand different viewpoints, solve disagreements, and
- n) work toward agreement on the options being discussed
- o) let only one person speak at a time without interrupting
- p) avoid talking too long or going off topic

### **Facilitation:**

- a) The Consensus Building Institute (CBI) will serve as facilitators for the Advisory Group. The job of the facilitators is to help ensure that the process runs smoothly, keep participants on track with the agenda, develop draft meeting agendas, prepare and distribute meeting summaries, generate draft agreements, and help parties resolve differences and achieve consensus, to the extent possible. Facilitators may use any number of approaches so that everyone has the opportunity to speak, that comments are kept to a reasonable length of time, and that discussion is helpful and moves the group forward.

- b) The facilitators are impartial and have no stake in the outcomes of the process. They have no decision-making authority and cannot impose any solution, settlement, or agreement among any or all of the parties. They will abide by the Ethical Standards of the Association of Conflict Resolution. In part, these standards require that: “The neutral must maintain impartiality toward all parties. Impartiality means freedom from favoritism or bias either by word or by action and a commitment to serve all parties as opposed to a single party.”
- c) The facilitators will be available to talk confidentially with participants during or between meetings. Facilitators, if asked, will keep private conversations confidential even if that means withholding information that the facilitators would prefer to be made available to the full group.

**Public Outreach and Engagement in the Advisory Group:**

- a) To the extent possible, in person Advisory Group meetings will be videotaped and televised by Government TV and footage will be made available to the public after meetings. Remote meetings will be by Zoom Webinar and will be recorded and also shared publicly.
- b) The City will post all meeting materials on [www.somervillema.gov/cag](http://www.somervillema.gov/cag), to allow clear and easy resident access. Contact information for the facilitators and names of the Advisory Group members will be posted. Agendas will be posted in advance, meeting materials as soon as possible, and summaries once they are approved. Interested residents can contact the Advisory Group members at [cag@somervillema.gov](mailto:cag@somervillema.gov). Updates will also be provided upon request at City Council and School Board meetings.

## **Broad Public Process**

The goal of the Broad Public Process is to engage and elicit input from the fullest possible range of Somerville families, educators, residents, and key stakeholders about the core questions regarding the scope and location for a new school building as part of the MSBA process. This includes the following questions:

- If we build a new school rather than renovate the old Winter Hill School, should the school be located at the Winter Hill site at Sycamore Street or elsewhere?
- Will the Brown School be included in a joint school, or, if not, how should we plan for the future of the Brown?
- What do these choices mean for the School Public Schools and City as a whole?

Input from this process will inform the work of the School Construction Advisory Group, whose task will be to deliberate and reach consensus on recommendations to share with the Mayor within the timeframe set by the School Building Committee.

The Broad Public Process will seek input in three phases, at key moments in the Advisory Group's process.

## **Guideposts for Effective Engagement:**

The Broad Public Process will aspire to the following principles for best practice to facilitate success:

- a) Broadly inclusive
- b) Meet people where they are
- c) Make clear the value proposition for public involvement
- d) Be responsive to input and evolve methods as needed
- e) Linked to direct process and decision making
- f) Clear plan for communicate results and how input was applied
- g) Plain language and multi-lingual
- h) Culturally competent
- i) Multiple means and methods to meet different needs

## **Methods:**

- a) Interactive public meeting(s) held at a range of times, with language interpretation and in-person and remote options
- b) Development and distribution of fact sheets, community surveys, and interactive feedback tools through broad outreach, including and not limited to the following:
  - a. Distribution in multiple languages, drawing on all methods available to the City and School District (email blasts, posts on City and School district social media, SPS messaging system, principal emails, press releases, PTA bulletins, bulletin boards, flyers, others)

- b. Tabling at school and city events, piggybacking on existing gathering, in coordination with SOIA, SFLC, and others
- c. Presentation at meetings of existing groups, including PTAs, Somerville Special Education Parent Advisory Council Special Ed group, Multi-lingual Learner Education Parent Group, Somerville Asian Family Network, others
- d. Selected school pick-up/drop-offs
- e. Other opportunities to “meet people where they are” - churches, parks, community events, sporting events, grocery stores

### **Phase One: (~Nov-Dec 2024): Gather Overall Priorities**

#### **Goals:**

- a) Ensure Somerville residents and families know about and understand the Somerville Community School Construction Process, including the mandates and timelines of the Advisory Group and the School Building Committee
- b) Elicit input about the key interests regarding the location and scope of the new school
- c) Identify criteria for measuring success of the process

#### **Product/Close the Loop:**

- a) After discussion from Advisory Group, report out summary of findings and a set of “Evaluation Criteria” based on community interests that will be used to assess the value of different outcome options

### **Phase Two: (~late spring 2025?): Review Options**

#### **Goals:**

- a) Update the community on the work of the Advisory Group to date
- b) Share a set of draft options being considered and elicit community input on the pros, cons, and potential improvements for each

#### **Product/Close the Loop:**

- a) Report out summary of findings and recommendations to bring back to the Advisory Group for further deliberation

### **Phase Three: (~September 2025): Final Improvements on Selected Option**

#### **Goals:**

- a) Update the community on the work of the Advisory Group to date
- b) Share a draft final approach and elicit concerns and potential improvements

#### **Product/Close the Loop:**

- a) Report out summary of findings and recommendations to bring back to the Advisory Group for final decision-making