

**To Accompany The May 2021 Needham Special Town Meeting Warrant
Article 20 FY2022 Operating Budget Item 19: Minuteman Regional High School Assessment**

A Brief Update On The Minuteman Regional High School

Greetings Needham Town Meeting members! This document is a brief snapshot of important developments regarding the Minuteman Regional High School whose nine-member-town district includes Needham. Minuteman is a Career/Technical high school that offers the usual high school programs: academics, arts, and sports, but Minuteman's special focus is on its career path educational offerings which range from Carpentry to BioTechnology. You can find details about the Minuteman school at its website: www.minuteman.org

This update focuses on the impact of Minuteman's new school building and a surprising enrollment consequence of the new building. In this document the term "School Committee" refers to both the Minuteman School Committee and the Minuteman Administration.

Minuteman's New Building

The new Minuteman school building opened September 2019. The new building was the result of a nearly ten year effort. The gestation period for the new school was unusually long due to disagreements among the district's then sixteen member towns. Although there was general agreement that the Minuteman facility needed to be replaced, there was substantial disagreement about the target enrollment capacity for the proposed new school. Proposals ranged from a 400 to a 1000 student capacity school!

To help resolve this disagreement the Minuteman School Committee decided to formally study three possible school sizes: 400, 600, or 800 students. After the study, in consultation with experts and member towns, the School Committee decided on a target enrollment of 628 students, which is the smallest size believed to be capable of supporting the school's mission.

This compromise target size was still controversial among some member towns. The solution was to develop a new regional agreement which allowed a path for some member towns to leave the district. Eventually seven member towns decided to leave. Minuteman held a district-wide vote proposing to build a new school, which easily passed. The final result was a reduced nine-member Minuteman district and a \$144.9 million construction project for a new school with the State expected to contribute more than \$40 million of the project cost.

The original construction plan was to take three years but with some targeted plan changes and talented contractors the construction time was reduced to two years. The school opened a year early and on budget in September 2019.

Minuteman has both traditional classrooms and specialty career focused rooms. The specialty rooms house the professional quality equipment/facilities required for instruction in each career path. These specialty rooms are far more expensive to design and build than traditional classrooms.

The new building is both beautiful and functional; the atmosphere and the facilities are such that students feel immersed in their chosen career path. The building atmosphere is one in which serious real-world work and learning is honored. Students who are treated as emerging professionals tend to act as emerging professionals. Student attitude and work quality reflect this environment. I am confident that upon visiting the new building Needham Citizens will understand that their money was wisely spent.

Public tours were supposed to begin in Spring 2020 but, as with almost everything, Covid shut down the building in March 2020. I expect in-person public tours to be offered during the next school year. In the meantime here is a highly recommended virtual tour of the new facility: <https://www.minuteman.org/apps/video/watch.jsp?v=10080972>

The Enrollment Surprise

The design enrollment of the new Minuteman school is 628 students. That is approximately 157 students per grade. It was clear that a new building together with updated program offerings would attract more students. My personal expectation was that within 2 to 5 years of school completion the school would be at full capacity with mostly in-district students, but that the school would also include a moderate number of out-of-district tuition paying students.

The actual enrollment trend over the last few years was unexpected. In-district applications have risen from 147 for class of 2022 applicants, to 270¹ for the class of 2025 applicants. That is nearly a **doubling of in-district applications over three years!** Furthermore the admissions yield, which is the percentage of accepted students who actually attend the school, has also risen substantially. Total projected Needham enrollment is expected to be 34 in fall 2021 which is up from 27 in the fall of 2020.

The new enrollment challenge is that the school does not have nearly enough room for the current demand. If Minuteman were to restrict admissions to 157 students per grade, the entering freshman class would be completely filled with in-district students yet still have a waiting list of about 70 in-district students. There would be no admissions of out-of-district students.

The School Committee felt that this size waiting list was unacceptable. In the short term it would be possible to allow for a larger Freshman class since the current upper class sizes are smaller. However, without any other action, allowing larger classes would be unsustainable, since a higher enrollment level would quickly exceed the building's design capacity. This was the conundrum faced by the School Committee when the admissions trend became clear last Fall.

Previously, the School Committee considered the possibility of a greater than expected applicant spike and developed a draft plan that we did not think would be applicable for at least a few years. To address the present application spike, the School Committee has updated the draft plan to meet the new admissions reality.

The plan takes advantage of the fact the the school's design capacity is primarily restricted by relatively inexpensive academic classroom space. Most of the more expensive Career/Tech spaces have additional capacity. Furthermore, although the new school building cannot be expanded, the school does have other spaces on its campus that could be repurposed. Thus the plan would be:

- Admit 200 students this year instead of 157
- Develop a plan to repurpose the available campus spaces to add the needed capacity over a period of about three years
- Target a revised school capacity allowing a maximum of 800 students

Minuteman is in the process of getting estimates for the necessary construction/renovations. The School Committee believes that this plan will not require further bonding from the member towns since the expansion project can be funded via:

- Public/Private Partners (several of which have already expressed interest)
- A variety of grants
- The Minuteman stabilization fund

The School Committee is comfortable that the economics of the proposed expansion will make sense for the district, but significant work needs to be done in order to create a comprehensive proposal.

Final Comments

It is an understatement to say that this has been a challenging year for all Needham schools including Minuteman. I am pleased with how Minuteman has, despite Covid, ensured student success, made use of its new facility, and flexibly responded to the unexpected influx of applications. I believe that the school's success in attracting applicants vindicates Needham's strong and generous support for Minuteman. I look forward to further reporting on the evolution of the school and how Minuteman can best serve Needham families.

Jeff Stulin
Needham Representative to the Minuteman School Committee
May 2021

¹ Many of the application/enrollment numbers in this report are as of March 1. It is likely that these numbers have changed since then.