

A Time to Build

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Merrimack voters will be presented with a warrant article in April asking whether the School District should raise and appropriate \$1,512,996 to build a combined School Administrative Unit (SAU) and Special Education (SPED) central office building. The article will need a three-fifths majority to pass because of the associated bond required to finance the project.



As one of this project's most vocal critics, my favorable vote at the Feb 12th budget committee meeting has apparently raised a few eyebrows (I literally heard a few whispers and snickers from some elected officials in the audience when I voted in favor). Let me state it simply, **I am in support of this article to build a new SAU/SPED facility.**

That said, many of the criticisms I have voiced still stand. I think it important for local voters to hear some of those criticisms so that they can make an informed choice. In short, elected officials missed an opportunity to make a strong case for a new SAU/SPED facility in my view. Officials that continue to overstate some positions to support the new building actually hurt the cause for this needed building. The Feb 12, 2013 budget committee meeting ([which can be viewed in its entirety here](#)) had a few examples of this.

- Population numbers are being spun by officials. Multiple presenters referred to the declining student population with skepticism. [The data is here](#) (pg 30/49) and it clearly shows declines in populations for the next 5 years then a leveling off after that. The data also comes with this disclaimer: “**Projections are more reliable for Years 1-5 in the future than for Years 6 and beyond.**” Maybe this pervasive idea among elected officials that Merrimack is growing is a hold-over from those who lived here through census after census of 100+% Merrimack population growth but the current data doesn't support anything close to that. The [latest census data from 2010](#) showed a 1.44% increase over the last decade, from 25,115 in 2000 to 25,477 in 2010. The same data shows double digit percent decreases for both male and female populations under the age of 15. That data does not support the argument that the town or the school population is growing anytime soon.
- Budget Committee members were given a handout that stated plainly, “**In the fall of 2012, Hurricane Sandy caused heavy damage to the Special Services building roof and interior spaces. The roof had to be replaced immediately; the basement is now totally unusable due to mold and flood damage.**” (emphasis mine) But, when pressed on this issue in the meeting, the Business Administrator backtracked by saying, “**We don't have a mold problem in the basement. We have taken care of the mold problems.**” Both statements cannot be true.
- I raised questions concerning the use of the new conference room to hold School Board meetings. The Planning & Building Committee Chairman assured the Budget Committee that, “**We have every intention of [School Board meetings] being [broadcast] live.**” I followed up with Merrimack TV staff the next day and learned that my call was the first that they heard of

plans for live broadcasts out of the new facility. Furthermore, the current floor plans for the building have no control room which would be required to broadcast meetings live. The Merrimack TV department head has also not been approached concerning potential staffing impacts resulting from adding an additional broadcasting location. In short, without the Merrimack TV department, there is no live Comcast broadcast and it is clear they are not in the loop at this point.

- Lastly, I predict more costs to come in future budgets for this facility. Costs that have yet to be discussed in detail publicly. Furniture replacement plans, technology integration for the new conference room, disposition of the old facilities, and incidentals that will be needed to operationalize the new building will all cost money. The amount of money and the plan for dealing with those issues is still an open question in my mind.

Despite these criticisms, I support the building of this facility primarily because the **current facilities are completely unsuited for SAU/SPED functions** and have been for a very long time. For anyone that doubts this, I highly encourage you to visit both facilities, take a tour and see for yourself (side note: consider registering as a candidate for one of the many school offices on the ballot while you are there). These two buildings will become the District money pit if we stay in them. I am not crazy about the idea of spending money to build a new building but a new facility has the benefit of many maintenance-free years of service to the District (along with many other benefits) while the annual bond costs to taxpayers is quite low with current interest rates.

After weighing all of the pros and cons, I conclude that building the new facility is the best option available for taxpayers today. Waiting for school officials to address declining populations by reorganizing the District is not pragmatic and there is no guarantee that enough space could be freed to place the central office into existing facilities. The bottom line for me is that I would hate to see another taxpayer dime wasted on these two 60's era houses. I encourage taxpayers to seek opinions from others, do some research on their own and then vote their conscience on this issue while recognizing that whether the article passes or fails, there will be costs to be borne by the taxpayer.