

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

PROCESS

When will the school committee vote on the proposal to close Mark's Meadow?

The Amherst School Committee is scheduled to vote on the current motion at their May 19, 2009 meeting.

What influence should the new superintendent, Dr. Rodriguez, have in this decision?

Dr. Rodriguez has been kept apprised of the process thus far, and he is aware of the implications which accompany such a decision. Given the familiarity that school officials and school committee members have with the school district, Dr. Rodriguez is confident that a sound decision will be made, however challenging and difficult.

If Mark's Meadow closes, how will the district plan for this major change? What types of Committees will be formed to support a one-year transition?

We have not yet finalized the number of committees which will be responsible for facilitating the transition. Closing a school will be complicated and will involve a variety of individuals and groups to support the work. Initially, it has been determined that there will be groups responsible for student support, staff support and assignments, communications, data management, and moving of district property. Key to success of each of these groups will be how they are connected to each other and with the community. The district will need significant assistance from staff, from parents and from the community at large, but committees will be coordinated at the district level.

ENROLLMENT/SPACE

Can our students fit into three schools, or will the schools be overcrowded?

The School Committee has gathered extensive data about projected enrollments in our schools. In 2007, the School Committee hired the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) to compute demographic and enrollment projections for our elementary schools. This report clearly states that our projected enrollment in K to 6 through 2016-2017 varies from 1368 to 1417. However, our actual numbers for the 2008-2009 school year were less than those projected by NESDEC, thus to estimate future enrollments, actual enrollments in combination with projections were used to estimate the enrollments for the coming years. Based on this information, the remaining three schools can hold the projected enrollment.

Why do the NESDEC projections differ from projections done by the district?

The NESDEC report was done in spring of 2007 and was based on enrollments at that time. They were not able to consider the impact of the creation of the Chinese Charter School when their report was done. Plus, the district annually conducts a projection exercise based on actual enrollments each October 1. Our in-district projections have proven reliable over time and are somewhat lower than those prepared by NESDEC.

Will the remaining 3 schools have enough classroom space over time? How much time?

Enrollments are currently projected by the district through the 2013-2014 school year, and are based on birth census data annually gathered and shared by the Town of Amherst. Projected enrollments show a decrease in enrollment of 15 students for next year, with a further decrease over the next two-year period of 21 students. After that point, the 2012-13 school year, we are projecting an enrollment of 1359 students. Currently the 4 elementary schools have a total enrollment of 1324 students.

What about Grade 6 moving to the Middle School? What are the chances of this occurring?

If Grade 6 moves to the Middle School, it will free up an additional 8-10 classrooms at the elementary level. We have discussed the desirability of including Grade 6 students at the Middle School for several years. Such a design – a Grades 6-8 Middle School – is pedagogically appropriate and sound. A report is expected from the Regionalization Committee in the fall, which should give us a good indication whether K-12 regionalization with Pelham, Leverett, Shutesbury, and Amherst is likely to occur.

If Marks Meadow is closed, would the quads at Wildwood and Fort River be turned into 4 classrooms each?

Currently, the building quads are comprised of 3 actual classrooms and 1 smaller space reserved for small group instruction. The number of classrooms reported in the "State of Our Schools Report", does not depend on any change in the configuration of current classrooms.

Will there be changes to the present location of special needs programs?

No decision has been made at this time, but it is possible one or more programs will be moved.

What would be the impact of keeping Marks Meadow open and just increase class sizes throughout the district?

The likely result of this would be class sizes above recommended maximums and the transfer of some or all kindergarten students either to or from Mark's Meadow to the other three elementary schools to better equalize these class sizes and more efficiently distribute staff. This would increase the cost of transporting students, but the costs would be far less than the cost of an increased number of classrooms.

Why not close part or half of Fort River or Wildwood instead of closing Mark's Meadow, thereby creating 1 more "small" school?

Both Fort River and Wildwood Schools are small learning communities by many measures. Further, it is not practical to keep part of a building vacant. We will still be responsible for insurance, energy, cleaning, and maintenance costs. We would still have administrative and support costs – a principal, secretaries, custodial, etc. Also, since the cafeteria and gymnasium spaces are on opposite ends of each building, space could not be completely shut down. Leaving Mark's Meadow open with its 12 classrooms and reducing the number of classrooms at either Fort River or Wildwood will not address the needed efficiency of more equally dividing students across classrooms to maintain small class sizes.

Fort River and Wildwood school buildings have proposals in to the state for construction funds to update the buildings. Where will we put the students if/when these projects get underway?

When Crocker Farm was expanded and renovated some years ago, careful consideration was given to the beginning and end dates of the annual district school calendar to accommodate the work of construction/renovation crews and to minimize disruption to students and staff during the school year. We anticipate similar planning for any upcoming renovations, which at this point will not be underway for several years.

REDISTRICTING

Could we redistrict to solve equity and then have four elementary schools?

Although it is possible to redistrict to better apportion equity in our current four elementary schools and a plan for this was presented in draft form to the community in April, there are two problems with this plan. First, it would not be in the best interest of children to redistrict now for equity and then redistrict again in one or two years for fiscal or enrollment reasons. This could be very difficult for children and their families. Second, redistricting and using four elementary schools would require two or three more teachers than our current system, at an estimated cost of \$108,000 to \$162,000 more per year. Thus, redistricting to four elementary schools solves our equity problem, but increases our financial problem.

We were able to view preliminary redistricting maps. When might a final redistricting plan be in place?

The preliminary plan must be reviewed by a consultant or consultants familiar with the challenges of redistricting and the implications of transportation routes. If it is voted to close Mark's Meadow, it is hoped we can secure a consultant right after the School Committee vote and have more definitive information to share by the end of June.

STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS/SUPPORT

Will all current Open Enrollments end no matter how many years they've been in place, and will only those applications associated with an IEP or 504 will be considered in the future?

There is presently a school committee policy which permits students from Amherst to attend their non-neighborhood school. Open enrollment is granted only if space is available in the requested school and if parents are willing to provide daily transportation. The School Committee will want to revisit this policy and see whether it can be sustained under a redistricting scenario, and whether such a policy creates school inequities.

How will the district address the special issues of families and students who, while they may be able to walk to their present school, may not be able to do if they are redistricted?

One of the teams that will be created if it is decided to close Mark's Meadow School, will address student and family support. Our schools have active parent groups in each. It is our hope we can work together with these groups to assist and/or resolve any impediments to school accessibility.

BUDGET/FINANCIAL

What is the budget problem for the Town of Amherst?

In November the Amherst Finance Committee issued preliminary FY2010 budget guidelines. At that time they suggested a 2.0% increase to town department and school budgets, and a 3.5% increase to the assessment to the town of Amherst for the Regional budget. For the Amherst schools that would have required that \$658,000 be cut from a level services budget.

The economic downturn has severely impacted state and local government funding across the country. Anticipating a \$3 billion revenue shortfall for FY2010, the Governor's budget recommended a reduction in lottery aid and in additional assistance to municipalities in January. The reduction for Amherst was projected to be \$2.77 million from the original FY2009 level. In April the State House Ways and Means Committee released its budget recommendation which cut state funding even further. Revenue projections for the Town of Amherst are following the same trend: current data paint a picture that is worse than earlier projections. Lower than expected lodging tax revenue and lower than usual growth in the tax base.

With the reduced revenue projections, the Town is now facing a funding gap of \$3.8 million in funding the Finance Committee's original guidance for FY2010 budgets.

What solutions are being considered by the Town?

The Budget Coordinating Group of the Town of Amherst, comprised of representatives from the boards and senior staff of each of the four budget entities (town, libraries, Amherst elementary schools, and the Regional School District), has been meeting on a regular basis to monitor and plan for meeting the fiscal challenge facing the town. Each department has identified the level of cuts beyond which major restructuring would be necessary for next year. These further cuts, along with projected increased local revenue for the town next year, reduced the funding gap to \$2.48 million.

Last week the House voted to increase the sales tax from 5.0% to 6.25%, and separately voted to allocate \$205 million to replace some of the aid to towns that was cut. It is anticipated that \$1.68 million from that source would flow to Amherst. However, this sales tax increase must also be passed by the Senate and signed into law by the Governor in order to be enacted.

The Budget Coordinating Group will recommend that the remaining gap be covered from reserves, with the understanding that any additional funding from the state or local option taxes be used first to make the reserve fund whole. The Finance Committee will discuss this concept at their next meeting

If the legislature decides to increase sales tax, when would the revenue be realized? How much revenue increase can be expected if this occurs?

Revenue from increased sales tax would begin to be available in FY2010. Early projections are noted above.

What about other sources of potential revenue - the meals tax, etc.?

The State Legislature will be considering some other sources of potential revenue, including some form of meals tax, a hotel/motel tax, and a measure to close a telecommunications tax loophole. These measures will likely be debated in May. Current outlook for these initiatives is pessimistic, due in part to the recently voted increase to the sales tax.

Aren't there other ways to decrease our budget problem? Could we accept School Choice students at the elementary level?

School Choice students bring in \$5,000 each per year. Consideration is given each year to targeting specific schools and grades where choice slots might be made available – mostly; at Crocker Farm and at Mark's Meadow, where class sizes tend to be smaller. However, the Amherst School Committee has been and is concerned about the possibility, over time, of overcrowding at the Regional level since there have been successive years of academic and elective cuts at the Region. School Choice regulations provide that if a student is accepted by a K-6 school district, they are entitled to attend the Regional district to which that town belongs.

If we keep four elementary schools open next year, what types of changes will we see in the schools?

To keep the four elementary schools open next year requires a cooperative process among all Town departments, including the willingness to use some funding from reserves if additional funding does not fill the revenue gap. This plan allows a year to properly plan to close a school and redistrict students into three remaining elementary schools. This plan calls for cutting \$1.14 million from the level services budget for the Amherst schools for FY2010. These cuts are listed elsewhere.

What will likely be cut if Mark's Meadow School remains open past June 2010?

In this uncertain fiscal environment it is difficult to project to FY2011 and beyond. If we assume that the recession will not recover quickly and that state funding will be flat, and that the town will only be able to allow a 2.5% growth to the budget, we can anticipate having to cut another \$1.3 million from a level services budget in FY2011.

Cuts of this magnitude - \$1.3 million - without closing a building might be as follows:

- Centralized librarian to support 4 buildings
- Centralized computer teacher to support 4 buildings
- Elimination of after school buses and programming
- Reconsideration of current instructional materials
- Significantly increased class sizes at all levels

If Mark's Meadow is closed a savings of \$530,000 is anticipated for the first year. This partial solution would then point to the need for an additional \$740,000 in cuts.

I understand that a decision to close Mark's Meadow will not eliminate the total budget gap for FY10 or FY11. How will the district address the gap for those years?

Beyond FY10, we will need to understand the implications of any additional tax revenue, identify the remaining gap, and then project anticipated district needs. As stated in the FCCC Report, an override for FY11 will likely be necessary to sustain the FY10 level of services to students.

Could we pass an override?

The FCCC report recognized that an override will probably be necessary at some point in the next 5 years to sustain even the most essential school and municipal services. However, all members of that committee agree that an override will not solve Amherst's long-term budget gap and substantial cutbacks will be necessary regardless.

GRANT FUNDING – TITLE 1

How will closing a school and redistricting impact the Title 1 funds we receive for low income students?

Redistricting will not decrease the Title I funding since it is based on a Town-wide census of our economically disadvantaged students. The change in school boundaries will, however, allow us to reapportion Title I funding to different schools based on the needs of the students in those schools.

REGIONALIZATION

How does this discussion fit in with the broader discussion about regionalizing our elementary schools with Pelham, Leverett, and Shutesbury, the way our middle school and high school are currently?

We are still unsure of the impact of potential regionalization and what the structure of all the schools might look like. The decision about closing Mark's Meadow has no apparent, direct impact on regionalization discussions.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Will UMass take the Mark's Meadow building back if we close the school? Is there any discussion of ways to retain the building in case we need it later, so we don't end up building a new school if enrollments increase?

The disposition of Mark's Meadow School needs to be discussed with UMass officials, and they have been invited to enter into dialogue with district officials. It is our hope that the building can be maintained for alternate district programs – South Amherst Campus and East Street Alternative High School – so that post secondary programs can be developed to support these students.

If the University agrees to let the district use Marks Meadow for secondary in-district programs, will there be costs related to this change?

There may be minor changes to bathroom fixtures to accommodate adolescents, but we do not foresee any major building costs associated with relocation of in-district programs.

You have identified Marks Meadow as the logical school to close in the detailed proposal. Can the district be more specific about why it would consider closing a school which is provided for free by the University of Massachusetts?

It's true that Mark's Meadow is "free" in terms of utilities, but it is not free in terms of what it costs the district to operate this building (teachers, staff, materials, buses, etc.). The reality is that all of our elementary students can fit in the other three buildings at a cost that is roughly \$700,000 a year less than keeping this building open. We also believe strongly that if we were to move to three elementary schools, we would either be able to use this building for free for another purpose (the alternative high school programs) or receive an annual payment from UMass for educating children of their graduate students. Thus, either of these options would more effectively allocate our limited resources than continuing to use MM as an elementary school. In addition, the timing of possibly closing Mark's Meadow may work within the timing of regionalization efforts.

If it really saves this much money, and it really is inevitable, then why not just rip off the Band-Aid and close Marks Meadow for 2009-2010, rather than hoping to convince the Finance Committee to support some use of reserves for FY10—not enough reserves to prevent a number of additional cuts that could affect all kids—and then hoping to convince Town Meeting to agree to such a Finance Committee recommendation?

This would be a daunting task to thoughtfully complete by September 09 and there are many components that must be considered. First and foremost are considerations of the health and safety of students. Next we need to carefully plan the manner in which the remaining 3 buildings will be staffed. We need to be sure that students from all schools can see familiar adults and have an opportunity to get used to a new school setting. Issues such as transportation, materials, furniture, equipment, books, etc., need to be carefully planned over time.

How can we keep everyone informed if it is voted to close Mark's Meadow in June 2010?

One of the teams which would be created would involve communication, so that there will be a central clearing house for information to the families, staff, and the community.