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**DISPOSITION RECOMMENDATIONS: FORMER  
NEIGHBORHOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS, ATHOL, MA**

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By: Shaun A. Suhoski, Town Manager, CPO

Riverbend Elementary, 180 Riverbend Street  
Ellen Bigelow Elementary, 125 Allen Street  
Sanders Street Elementary, 306 Sanders Street  
Pleasant Street Elementary, 1060 Pleasant Street

*Prepared for:*

**Athol Board of Selectmen  
August 2, 2016**

## Short Background

As the Board is aware, on August 1, the Town assumed care, custody and control of the Ellen Bigelow, Riverbend and Sanders Street elementary schools. Heather Brissette has added the buildings to our covered properties for insurance purposes effective on such date.

Last week, Town departments were able to tour through the three buildings in advance of the school district's "yard sale" and obtained some items that may be of value, such as a gas stove for the Town Hall kitchen.

The Board of Selectmen has been consistent over the past year in advocating my office move promptly on plans for disposition of these buildings so that they do not sit as vacant eyesores in the community.

Towards that end, over the summer, the chairman of the Athol Economic Development Industrial Corp. (EDIC) and I brought in several developers – and a contractor – to look at the structures. This was important as a baseline to gauge whether the private sector would have interest in preserving the buildings and creating a development that would enhance the neighborhood and community generally.

Each of the parties showed interest in the buildings – primarily Riverbend/Ellen Bigelow because of the already-available parking – and the potential for development; whether for affordable housing, or, a mix of affordable and market rate elderly housing with assistive services on-site or located nearby the site. The organizations we engaged are:

- 1) ***NewVue Communities*** (formerly Twin City CDC), Fitchburg. Web: [www.newvuecommunities.org](http://www.newvuecommunities.org)
- 2) ***HAP Housing***, Springfield. Web: [www.haphousing.org](http://www.haphousing.org)
- 3) ***Volunteers of America – Massachusetts***, Jamaica Plain. Web: [www.voamass.org](http://www.voamass.org)

Note: As director of economic development in Ayer, I worked with VOA-Mass. to finance and redevelop a vacant former community hospital and nursing home into an assisted living facility known as Nashoba Park; still a success 10 years later.

- See: [www.seniorlivingresidences.com/find-a-community/nashoba-park-ayer](http://www.seniorlivingresidences.com/find-a-community/nashoba-park-ayer)

Keeping in mind that the Town's administrative capacity is not unlimited, I propose the following plan for the Board's review and recommendation on moving forward with disposition of the above buildings, and for the Pleasant Street School building which will revert to Town control on September 1.

## 1. Riverbend and Ellen Bigelow Schools and Campus

These two structures contain a combined 52,980 square feet and are located on two parcels of land that are bounded in a 3.25 acre quadrangle by Allen St., Riverbend St., Congress St. and Park Ave.

Without doubt, these facilities with existing parking and available green space make an ideal palette for redevelopment to benefit both the neighborhood and community.



Riverbend and Ellen Bigelow Schools

My recommendation to the Board is to issue a Request for Proposals (please see draft RFP provided for your review) to solicit ideas from the private sector for productive end use of the structures and land. The RFP would be rated on criteria that the community would prefer to see in a redevelopment plan, but, would also require a financial pro forma and proven prior experience in completing similar projects.

Some suggestions for minimum and/or preferential criteria in the RFP include:

- Pro forma budget and financial stability of team
- Successful prior experience with similar projects as proposed
- Projects that provide housing options for seniors to age-in-place highly preferred
- Projects that include supportive senior services on or proximate to site preferred
- Projects that provide mix of market and affordable housing preferred
- Projects that preserve the existing façade of one or both buildings highly preferred
- Projects that incorporate green space and/or neighborhood shared park space highly preferred
- Projects that minimize negative impacts on neighborhood preferred
- Projects that create jobs highly preferred
- Project must result in either property tax generation, or, be subject to payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOT) agreement
- Projects that can be completed within 24 months highly preferred

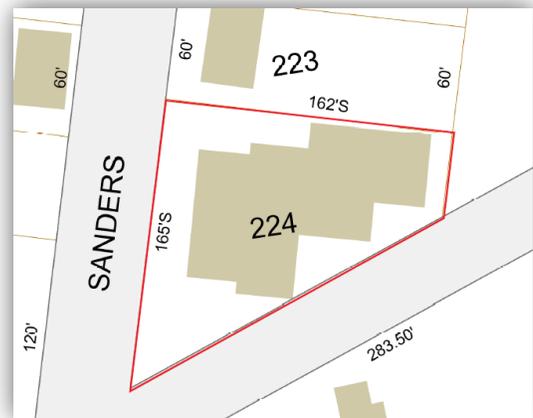
If the Board concurs with the above recommendation, I would request the following vote be taken tonight to authorize the Town Manager to move forward with issuing an RFP upon review as to form by Town Counsel.

**Proposed Motion:** Move that the Board of Selectmen declare the former school buildings known as Riverbend Elementary School, 180 Riverbend Street, and Ellen Bigelow Elementary School, 125 Allen Street, and the underlying land identified as Assessor's Parcels 031-219 and 031-229, as surplus property, and, further to the authorization granted by Article 31 of the June 13, 2016 Annual Town Meeting, authorize the Town Manager to solicit proposals for the productive use of such surplus property.

## 2. Sanders Street Elementary School

Sanders Street Elementary School was originally constructed in 1919 with expansions built in 1922 and 1954. This 16,800 square foot property is hampered by its 0.5 acre site and only two paved parking spaces.

One of the affordable housing developers did express interest in the property, however, the current land boundaries do not provide any parking close to Zoning Bylaw requirements.



Sanders Street Site Limits Options

I see three options: (1) immediately issue an Invitation For Bids (IFB) to seek a prompt sale to the highest bidder with a set minimum bid (eg. \$25,000., but to be determined in Executive Session), (2) conduct a public auction and sell to the highest bidder, again with a pre-determined minimum bid, or (3) refer the property to the EDIC and Director of Planning and Development for recommendation on potentially re-drawing the property lines to incorporate a portion of the abutting town-owned land used for tennis courts, a small playground and greenspace. Once a sufficient amount of land to carry the parking load can be merged with the school property a Request for Proposals could then be issued.

Given staff capacity and the time required to work through the RFP for Riverbend and Ellen Bigelow schools, my recommendation is to issue an Invitation For Bids (IFB) and attempt to sell the property before winter.

The worst case is there are no bidders meeting the minimum and the Town proceeds to winterize the structure and look at further options. The best case is a bidder meets the Town's minimum, the property is conveyed and whomever takes ownership must still comply with the requirements of the applicable underlying or overlay Zoning Bylaws.

**Proposed Motion:** Move that the Board of Selectmen declare the former school building known as Sanders Street Elementary School, 306 Sanders Street, and the underlying land identified as Assessor's Parcel 029-224, as surplus property, and, further to the authorization granted by Article 32 of the June 13, 2016 Annual Town Meeting, authorize the Town Manager to dispose of such property in accordance with applicable procurement law.

### 3. Pleasant Street Elementary School

Following for public consumption is information that I have previously passed along to the members of the Board identifying very real constraints and what I believe are compelling reasons **NOT** to immediately sell or convey this school from public ownership.



Pleasant Street School

The regional school district is currently staging and storing some items in the building pending the opening and commissioning of the new elementary school. The School Committee voted to transfer the care, custody and control of this 29,200 square foot facility – built in 1967 according to school records – to the Town effective on September 1.

I believe the Town should convene a comprehensive planning process to guide the ultimate disposition of this property. There are too many variables to leave this site to chance in the private sector.

Some of the distinguishing characteristics of this building and site – versus the other three schools – are obvious, while others became apparent when more research was done over the summer in preparation of acquiring the school. Consider the following:

- The site and building are the entrance to school “campus” including middle school and new Athol Community Elementary School
- The current parcels include the private driveway for all three school buildings... the Town will need to determine whether “shared” driveway is acceptable under zoning, or, whether and where a new curb cut is required prior to sale

- Future use should be complementary to school / education use or at least compatible with surrounding neighborhood



- Land for future education use is at a premium, and, sites proximate to the newer buildings may be worth retaining for future use whether for education, administration or needed athletic fields or facilities

#### Recommendation on Pleasant Street School Campus

In consideration of the very unique qualities of the Pleasant Street School site, I recommend that the Board of Selectmen authorize the Director of Planning and Development to convene a reuse planning committee with membership from A-R regional school district/committee, Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Town Manager, Capital Planning Committee and interested citizen(s) to recommend future use or disposition plan.

Also, while the Town does not assume control of this site until September 1, there are some other factors for consideration during the interim period.

There is currently a need for some classroom space and limited office space for a pair of service organizations focused on children's needs. We would need to generate a revenue stream of at least \$32,000 per year to cover expenses should we lease space to these or other organizations.

I am working with the agencies, the school superintendent and facilities manager, the planning director and chairman of the capital planning committee to devise a budget and plan that would allow temporary occupancy for the coming year (note that the premises must pass a lead inspection for federal programs scheduled for later this week).

The benefits to keeping the building occupied and maintained are of great importance to the Town and future value of the structure, namely,

- Continued certificate of occupancy (assuming same/similar use grouping)
- Building remains heated/occupied over winter season
- Routine interior and exterior maintenance performed through agreement with schools and Dept. of Public Works
- Town assists non-profit agencies with temporary needs for space
- Users of facility provide services to children (complementary use)

There is no guarantee as of yet that we have sufficient demand to merit keeping the building open, but, there is genuine interest and I will work to resolve this option before the end of August.

Also, architect Paul Lieneck – who designed the cupola and exterior stairway repairs for Town Hall – has records of the original plans for the school (by Haynes, Lieneck and Smith) and will help guide any accommodations required (eg. limited heating zone, code concerns) for a nominal fee which I can initially cover from professional services until rents are received.

Because of the fast-approaching school year, I am seeking the Board's support in this endeavor to facilitate a temporary partial occupancy of Pleasant Street School over the next year while the comprehensive disposition or reuse plan is developed as outlined above.

In my opinion, this is the most prudent course of action.

Thank you.