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Essex again votes no

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Essex voters last night delivered the same message as they did last month -- only louder.

In the biggest town election in at least the last 25 years, Essex residents voted 1,044-619 against the proposed \$35.5 million Manchester Essex Regional Middle School High School.

Voter turnout for the second special election on the complex proposal yesterday -- about two-thirds of the Essex electorate -- was larger than the original June 9 special election, but the ultimate result was the same. The outcome of the June 9 special election on the issue was 624-613 against the project. The narrow margin prompted a recount that left the results the same.

Essex selectmen voted to hold the second special election after concerns arose that not everyone who wanted to vote on the school proposal had the opportunity in the first special election because of its noon to 8 p.m. time frame. Selectmen decided to keep the polls open for a longer period of time from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. during yesterday's second special election.

To move forward, the project needed a majority vote in both Manchester and Essex. It received the majority of the vote in Manchester June 9.

Essex Selectman Jeffrey Jones, who supported the second special election, said the larger voter turnout made him feel vindicated about

NEWS

BROWSER

- [Home](#)
- [Page One](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Police & Fire](#)
- [Court](#)
- [North Shore](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Record](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- Features*
- [Money](#)
- [Health](#)
- [At Home](#)
- [Weekender](#)
- [Living](#)
- [Classified](#)

Other pages on our Web Site

Navigate

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his decision to extend the polling hours.

"It proves the point that more people are getting out to vote," he said. "Also, I think people have a lot more information this time."

District Superintendent Robert Shaps said the larger turnout showed a greater commitment to the issue on the part of Essex residents.

"People are more aware of the importance of the issue, on both sides," he said.

School District Finance Committee Chairman Mark Lynch said he was disappointed with the result of the election.

"Those that said there's a better alternative (to the proposal) have their work cut out for them," he said.

Susan Beckmann, chairwoman of the Manchester Essex School Committee, said she was also disappointed.

"I think we did the best we could," she said. "We did what we were committed to do, which was allow the democratic process to happen. It was fair, it was democratic and that's how it goes."

Essex resident Dennis Monagle said he voted against the proposal because he felt the district was rushing into building a school based on the promise of state aid without really thinking it through.

"For the amount of money it would cost, it would make more sense to come up with a better solution," he said.

But resident Brian McCormick voted for the proposed school complex because he was confident the state's School Building Assistance program would eventually come through with funding for the proposed school, and it made sense for Essex to vote for the proposal now in order to claim SBA reimbursement.

"I think we absolutely need a new high school, now and not later," he said. "I think the School Committee and the Building Committee did a fantastic job of putting together a fiscally responsible plan."

Jim Sullivan, an Essex resident who voted for the proposed school at the June 9 special election, said despite wanting a new school, he changed his mind after being presented with more information about the current proposal.

"I hope a different solution is presented," said Sullivan.

Shaps said although the vote didn't turn out as he had hoped, he and other Manchester Essex Regional School District officials would still work to provide a quality education for students.

"The School Committee and officials will continue to move forward to build a strong district with good facilities to support our students' educations," he said.

NEWS BROWSER	Home - Page One - Obituaries - Police & Fire - Court - North Shore - Sports - For The Record - Opinion - Money - Health - At Home - Weekender - Living - Classified
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