



# Frequently Asked Questions

Release 8, 2003-02-15

## 1. Why do we need to renovate Reading Memorial High?

Reading Memorial High School simply does not provide the quality educational environment that our students and teachers deserve. Because of its age and the wear and tear of thousands of students over the years, the current building, constructed in 1952 and expanded in 1972, is in **horrendous physical condition** and features sadly **outdated educational facilities**. These include:

- A heating system unable to prevent temperatures from fluctuating between 50-90 degrees.
- A crumbling plumbing system. Sadly, last fall a broken pipe flooded Massachusetts Teachers of the Year Jeff Ryan's classroom.
- Too few computers, and outdated or nonexistent technology.
- Outdated science labs.
- Rusting windows and roof sections in need of replacement.
- Inadequate theatre, music and art space.
- Athletic facilities for young women in violation of federal law.
- A lack of accessibility to all areas for those with disabilities.
- No building-wide security or communication system.
- A seriously inefficient building, both in terms of heat loss, and in terms of management of the facility.

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## 2. I heard we can just spend \$20,000,000 to "fix up" RMHS. What's wrong with that idea?

Flansburgh Associates, our architect, recently put a cost on 'repairs' at RMHS - these are things that really need help. While the Building Committee had (about a year ago) estimated those costs at \$20M, Flansburgh's more accurate estimate of repair costs was about \$17M. If we allow for the costs of phasing (relocating students while some of this work happens), the cost could very well be more, and it would by its nature be a piecemeal approach. Flansburgh advises that only about \$4M would come back from the State, leaving Reading to pay \$13M or more.

Remember that there are no allocations in that analysis for any changes or upgrades to anything related to education. We still need to address music and drama deficiencies, we need to get at the science labs, and all classrooms need work in general. The science labs alone need about about \$2.25M in upgrades. It will cost about \$450,000 just to paint the facility, and that's not in the \$17M figure.

So, we can spend more than \$13M on needed repairs, and we get a cleaned up, inefficient, energy wasting 1950's high school. Or we can spend \$25M and get the whole project done right. That's not much of a choice.

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## 3. People say the School Department hasn't maintained RMHS, and that we shouldn't rebuild it because they will just let it deteriorate. Is that true?

Not true! The school department has, over the years, done very well maintaining RMHS given available funds. The building is clean and operates as well as can be expected for its age. While we can always do more with maintenance, the fact is that the building is simply worn out. Heating and plumbing systems, floors and ceilings, roofs and windows - these things don't last 50 years in your home, and they don't last 50 years in a busy high school. It's been said that if you put the number of kids per square foot that RMHS has in an average home, it would be like having 8 or 10 teenagers in your home, awake and active, for 10 hours a day! What would that do to your home?

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## 4. Why did the School Building Committee choose to demolish a part of the facility?

The SBC explored three options in great detail. One renovated all areas of the existing high school, and another proposed to demolish a small portion and build a new cafeteria. While both of these provided for viable end products, the SBC was advised that construction would take between three and four years due to the need to phase construction around ongoing educational operations. As this process could directly affect some students'™ entire career at RMHS, the architect proposed that we build a new academic wing first, leaving only a part of the existing facility in place. This has the following benefits:

- A **much shortened construction phase** – the actual time of building and rebuilding is reduced to two years. After all work is done, the original 1952 wing will be torn down.
  - **Less disruption to education** – construction is limited to large blocks of space that are fully separated from day to day use. This will be safer and less of a distraction to education.
  - **Spaces will be available for all programs** at all times during the process. In the first two options, there would have been significant periods during which science labs, music, drama, the auditorium would be without proper space. Now, only the Media Center will need a short temporary home.
  - A **more efficient** building – the proposal is for a smaller facility that will be easier and cheaper to heat and maintain, and will provide for better security and monitoring of day to day activities.
  - **Improved spaces** – the accepted scheme provides for a new auditorium that will better suit the music and drama programs so needed in the community. It will provide for 850 to 900 good seats, rather than the current larger room with areas of poor sightlines and unused balcony seating.
  - **Less risk** – a large renovation project includes inherent cost risks due to the possibility of hidden conditions. Changing a portion of the project to new reduces that risk significantly.
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## 5. Aren't we losing space with this proposal?

We are downsizing square footage in wide corridors, extra stairways, an oversized kitchen, and other similar **underutilized spaces**. These lost spaces serve no **educational use**.

While the old Girl's will also be lost, the field house is more than large enough to handle all PE needs. Even if we had chosen an option that kept the old gym, it would have been unavailable for close to 4 years while in use as swing space for temporary classrooms during construction. This plan eliminates the expense of TWO gym renovations (into classrooms and then back into a gym). Gym space for other community activities can be found by utilizing the gyms at the other schools.

The proposed solution, through an innovative design, takes the current rambling building and gives us a smaller, more efficient RMHS that **maintains EVERY current program** and **adds space** for needed programs.

## 6. Why do we need to tear down the old Girl's Gym?

The main premise of the selected design is that we need to build significant new space prior to start of the renovation. This is so we can complete the main part of the project in two years instead of 3 1/2, lessening impact on the students. Once the decision to build some new space is made, we are forced to reduce the overall area of the school - remember how large it is now! The architects have made it clear that the most logical wing to tear down is the old 1950's wing, which is the most dilapidated, the most inefficient, and the most expensive to renovate. The old girl's gym is included in this section, and the fieldhouse provides more than enough space for PE and athletic needs.

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## 7. Why a new auditorium?

Our architects estimate it will cost **less** to build a modern auditorium with proper acoustic design, lighting, stage and backstage space than to modify the existing structure so it would meet the same standards. It is also easier and cheaper to make the needed modifications for the Americans with Disabilities Act.

While the plan calls for fewer seats than the current auditorium has, keep in mind that about 25% of the current seats are pretty undesirable because of location behind poles or far from the stage, or under a balcony where the sound gets lost.

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## 8. What else do we get?

In addition to the renovation and new education spaces, the proposed project includes:

- A greatly expanded **computer network** using the most current computer technology
  - A safer school with modern **security and communication systems**
  - A new **Arts** area with appropriate spaces for Drama, Arts, and Music.
  - Newly renovated **athletic fields** for play 365 days a year, all day long, with limited maintenance.
  - **Other fields** on the Birch Meadow fields will also be upgraded.
  - Increased on site **parking**. The addition of 180 more parking spaces will reduce traffic congestion.
  - **Traffic flow** into and out of the campus will be improved by reconfiguration.
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## 9. How much will it cost?

On average, \$31 per month for the average house. The proposal is projected to cost \$54,305,000, inclusive of all construction costs, fees, furnishings, and equipment. Reimbursement from the State's School Building Assistance Board (SBAB) is projected at 54.3% of total principal and interest. Based on projections from the town's finance director, the average Reading home, valued at \$355,000, will see a tax increase of an average \$373.51 per year for 25 years.

These are tax dollars that will stay in Reading, benefit Reading citizens, and not disappear into state coffers.

The state has a tax relief program for people 65 or older, who meet income and other eligibility guidelines, called the Circuit Breaker program. Details are online at the [Mass Dept. of Revenue](#). You can also contact Brad Jones at 617-722-2100 for information, or see his [article published through TownOnline.com](#).

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## 10. How sure are we of State reimbursement? At what point in the approval process will the project go forward?

The project will be submitted to the State for approval on June 1 of this year. The project will not proceed into construction until it is approved for reimbursement by the State. The School Building Assistance Board (SBAB) has never missed a commitment in its 30 years of existence. Once that commitment is made, we should feel confident that the reimbursement will arrive when promised. Further, Governor Romney has gone on record as saying that preserving monies for education is a priority for him. (Boston Globe, pg. 1, 1/16/03)

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## 11. I just read that the State will not be funding any more school projects. What is going on?

The Department of Education, in an effort to slow the rise in the cost of the school reimbursement program, has decided to temporarily stop accepting school project applications. According to the Boston Herald, State Education Commissioner David Driscoll says they could begin accepting applications again as soon as July 1st of this year.

This does not mean the reimbursement program is being dismantled. It does not mean that Reading will never receive State funding for the RMHS project. It is simply a part of the State's plan to control spending in the midst of the current fiscal crisis. Reading will be reimbursed, and the project will not proceed until it is approved by the State.

This moratorium does not make the problems at RMHS go away. We cannot walk away from our responsibilities because of a fiscal crisis. Reading High needs our support now more than ever.

This situation makes it even more imperative that we support Question 1 so that Reading can be first in line for funding when applications are again accepted. We should be confident that once this moratorium is lifted, Reading will receive state funding at 50% or more for the RMHS project.

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## 12. Why now? Can't we wait until times are better?

We will have to spend money on the high school in the next several years, whether this debt exclusion passes or not. Most of the systems (e.g., plumbing, lighting, wiring, heating, windows etc.) have outlived their expected useful life. Already this year, \$250,000 of unanticipated emergency repairs have eaten into the school department budget. This is guaranteed to continue if we don't address the problems comprehensively.

The truth is, now is the time! The SBAB has proposed legislation that would reduce the state's reimbursement rate for all projects submitted after June of this year. This, combined with normal inflation if we wait, would increase Reading's share of the project cost by well over \$5,000,000. Our students need decent learning conditions now. Waiting will only exacerbate the problems and increase the cost.

The problems with the operating budget (teacher layoffs, etc.) are also serious but are funded differently, from a separate pool of money. This issue will most likely be addressed through an override question on the April ballot. Choosing to delay renovations at the high school does not free up any money for the operating budget.

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### 13. When would the project start? When would it be complete?

Construction would probably start in the late spring of 2004. The newly renovated/rebuilt Reading Memorial High would be ready in the fall of 2006.

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### 14. What will Building Pride do with the information collected while going door to door?

The goal of this campaign is to identify YES voters. We will need every YES vote we can muster to win this election. The names, addresses and telephone numbers we collect will be used to ensure that every supporter is able to cast their vote in the Special Election. We foresee making reminder calls and mailing a flyer to answer questions that surface during the campaign.

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### 15. Do I have time to Register to Vote? How do I do it?

Residents who are unregistered must have their Registration form to the Town Clerk by Feb 5 to vote February 25. Vote Managers have supplies of Mail-In Voter Registration forms. Or, you may go to Town Hall to register. The Town Clerk's office will be open until 8pm on the evening of Feb 5.

Voter registration forms can also be requested from the Mass. Secretary of State at 617.727.2828.

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### 16. How can I vote if I'm not able to get to the polls on Feb. 25?

If you are a Registered Voter, you qualify to vote by Absentee Ballot if

1. you will be away on business or vacation on February 25 or
2. if you have a physical disability.

**To vote in person**, go to Town Hall between Feb 1 and noon on Feb 24 to fill out both the Absentee Ballot Application and the ballot.

**To vote by mail**, deliver or mail an Application to Reading Town Clerk's office right away. They mail you the ballot, you or a family member mail it back to them or deliver it to Town Hall. Your ballot must be received by the Town Clerk's office on or before Feb 25. Please allow ample time for mailing.

You can get an Absentee Ballot Application from Town Hall (spouse or parent can pick one up), complete it and

deliver or mail it to Reading Town Clerk's office RIGHT AWAY. This can also be done in a letter to the Town Clerk that states:

1. your voting address in Reading,
  2. the fact that you want to vote absentee,
  3. where the absentee ballot is to be mailed, and
  4. the signature of all voters who want absentee ballots.
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## 17. Won't this increase taxes for my neighbor who's on a fixed income?

Folks on a limited income should be made aware of a MA "Circuit Breaker" program which provides property tax relief to low and moderate income senior citizens.

Details are online at the [Mass Dept. of Revenue](#). You can also contact Brad Jones at 617-722-2100 for information, or see his [article published through TownOnline.com](#).

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[Building Pride](#)