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## **SCHOOL BOND SPECIAL ELECTION DAY SHIFTED — LIKELY NOV. 7**

MIDDLETOWN, R.I. (MARCH 6, 2023) – The date for a special election on a new middle-high school is being pushed back.

At a meeting Monday night in Town Hall, the Town Council unanimously agreed to move the town wide vote on the \$190 million proposal from May 2 until the fall — likely Nov. 7.

Local leaders said the shift was needed to make sure voters had the best, most accurate information before going to the polls. The Nov. 7 date is also one of two in play for a special election to fill the soon to be vacated seat of U.S. Rep. David Cicilline.

By combining elections, local leaders said Middletown would save money and time by not having two special elections — and likely generate a higher voter turnout. They said the move also reduced the possibility of fatigue for the myriad of volunteers who staff every election.

“Several things have occurred — one is the Cicilline election coming up, that’s not the main reason — but we could have one election instead of two elections,” council President Paul M. Rodrigues said. “We feel it will give us more time once the General Assembly decides what percentage (reimbursement) we’re going to get. Then, we can come out with the real concrete numbers.”



By having more time to gather the facts, Rodrigues said everyone stood to benefit and the likelihood was better that everyone had the best data to make a good choice for the community. It would also avoid the loss of a school day for learning, he added.

From his perspective, Rodrigues said the one drawback was the amount of money the town could be into the planning and design aspects of the project without a guarantee if it was approved by voters.

Town officials said if the bond vote went forward in May, the town would be on the hook for about \$1 million in design and architectural fees. However, with the early November special election date now on the table, that amount could balloon to \$2.5 million. However, if the school bond was approved at the special election, the town could be reimbursed for that money. If the bond fails, Middletown taxpayers would be responsible for picking up that tab.

“At the end of the day, this gives us more time,” Rodrigues said. “It gives us more time to give you more concrete answers. We feel that’s the right thing to do.”

Vice President Thomas Welch said he supported the move for all the above reasons — and the fact there should be better turnout in November.

“If we wait until the fall election, there’s traditionally a better turnout, so more voters get to weigh in,” Welch said. “It is only six weeks away if we kept this (May 2) timeline, which is really tight.”

In November 2022, Newport shot down plans to regionalize schools by less than 400 votes despite overwhelming popular support for the concept in Middletown. Since then, Middletown leaders have moved quickly to capitalize on demands from voters for new schools and to remake the educational system into a 21st century powerhouse.

The May 2 special election date was originally selected about a month ago. The main driver for the aggressive timeline was looming state reimbursement deadlines at the end of 2023.

While Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown said he believed the town would have secured passage of the \$190 million bond in early May, the decision to delay the special election was best.

“There are still a number of variables out there right now, one being how much our taxpayers will have to pay for a new state-of-the-art school,” Brown said. “We have several pieces of legislation before the General Assembly right now to increase our reimbursements and we’ll know the status of those bills definitively by Nov. 7.”

At the same time, Brown said he and other staff and volunteers would continue to work hard to make sure the process around the new school project was as open and transparent as possible.

“It’s important that our residents know exactly what they’re voting on and there are a few too many moving pieces right now,” Brown said. “Our efforts continue with no disruption to the work cycle and we will meet all of (the state Department of Education’s) deadlines.”

In November 2021, an independent architectural firm reported \$190 million in upgrades were needed to the district’s four existing schools before a ceiling or wall were opened. That included asbestos abatement, air quality improvements, security upgrades and other problems identified in their lengthy report. To review that document, visit <https://mdl.town/Report> online.

During tours of the schools, education officials, architects and others have said the situation with the school buildings hasn’t improved since. Just recently, a water pipe at Gaudet Middle School let go, causing extensive damage to the building and forcing students to have a distance learning day from home.

To help come up with the best plan possible, the School Building Committee hired Collier International as project managers, with the DBVW and HMFH architectural firms providing assistance. Educational planning expert Manuel Cordero was also brought in to help design the new building.

According to the current proposal, the new middle-high school would combine two schools into one on property north of Gaudet Middle School.

The way the 231,000-square-foot building was laid out, grades 6-8 and 9-12 would be completely separate and not occupy any of the same spaces at the same time. For economy, they would both access places like the cafeteria, auditorium and gyms and athletic fields, but at different times of the day.

Fourth and fifth grade students now housed in the Gaudet Learning Academy would be relocated into the existing Valley Road high school building, which would be transformed into a pre-kindergarten through fifth grade early learning center.

For the latest information about the project, visit <https://mdl.town/NewSchool> online. The volunteer School Building Committee is also providing regular updates <https://mdl.town/BuildingCommittee> online.

**Document Link:** <https://www.middlestownri.com/DocumentCenter/View/7795/nycu-special-election>

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