



MIDDLETOWN
Rhode Island

PUBLIC AFFAIRS
TOWN OF MIDDLETOWN

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To: Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown
From: Matt Sheley, Public Affairs Officer
Subject: New School Bond Question & Answer Sheet
Date: March 21, 2023

Shawn, in light of the success we've had with Question & Answer sheets on other items, it seemed to make sense to do one to help the public better understand the special election this fall. Obviously, with things remaining fluid, this document will be updated as new, relevant information becomes available. With that in mind, let's get right to it.

Question 1: I thought we already approved a new school last November. Why are we having a special election in the fall?

- We agree that sometimes things can be a little confusing. Yes, Middletown voters overwhelmingly approved regionalization and a bond for the construction of all new schools in town on Nov. 8, 2022. But because Newport shot down the proposal by less than 400 votes, we had to pivot and come up with a new plan — the one before voters today.

Question 2: Less than 400 votes doesn't seem like a lot. Why not try regionalization again?

- Actually, we did. Middletown officials reached out to their counterparts in Newport — and other local communities — to see if there was common ground. Unfortunately, we couldn't make the pieces fit.

Question 3: Okay, we're where we are now. But why does everything seem so rushed?

- If you're feeling rushed, imagine how the people working behind the scenes feel. Rest assured, it's not because they like more work. Instead, we need to act quickly because applications for attractive state reimbursements on new school building construction expired in December 2023. And if we miss those deadlines, students and staff don't get the schools they need — and deserve — or we pay tens of millions more for those same buildings.

Question 4: How are we going to save money by building new?

- The way the reimbursements work from the state Department of Education (RIDE), communities are rewarded for constructing state-of-the-art educational environments instead of Band-Aiding existing schools. Under the current formula, Middletown is eligible for at least a 52 percent reimbursement from RIDE on its current proposal. Right now, town officials and local legislators are working to try to

get that reimbursement raised to 60 or 65 percent. And because the deadlines for those applications are due to the state by the end of the year, that clock is ticking — quickly.

Question 5: In the past, Middletown has largely tried to fix the buildings it has. Why not go that route?

- There are a number of reasons. One is because the schools are each 60 plus years old and weren't designed for today's educational world. Two, on a base level, they require at least \$190 million in repairs that we know of before a wall is opened or a nail pulled. And then, there's the fact Middletown taxpayers will have to pay much more of the freight for that work without nearly the same robust reimbursements from the state.

Question 6: What are the basics of this plan?

- The proposal is to build two schools in one project on the former Starlight Drive-In property on Aquidneck Avenue just north of Gaudet Middle School. Students from grades 6-8 would go to classes in one wing of the 231,000-square-foot school, with grades 9-12 in another completely separate section. We have the top educational building program experts — Manuel Cordero — working on our team to help design the middle-high school for today's learners, but also for decades to come. The way the new middle-high school is laid out, flexibility and multi-functional spaces will be critical.

Question 7: Why aren't we doing all the schools at once?

- While we'd love to, the reason we can't address everything at once comes down to one factor — money. Our independent financial experts — Hilltop Securities — have said it wouldn't be advisable to go out to bond for everything together.

Question 8: How come?

- Hilltop Securities have said we'd be stressing our bonding limits and leaving no room in case something came up unexpectedly. However, Hilltop has said we're within the acceptable guide rails with our current bond proposal and it should not impact our bond rating, ability to borrow or other important financial factors. See <https://mdl.town/Hilltop> for more information.

Question 9: How long are we going to have to pay for this bond, if it's approved?

- The short answer is 25 or 30 years, depending on what the Town Council decides. If the council opts for a 25-year note, we pay more up front, but save money on the bottom line. If the council decides for a 30-year bond, every taxpayer pays less on their bill, but for a longer time.

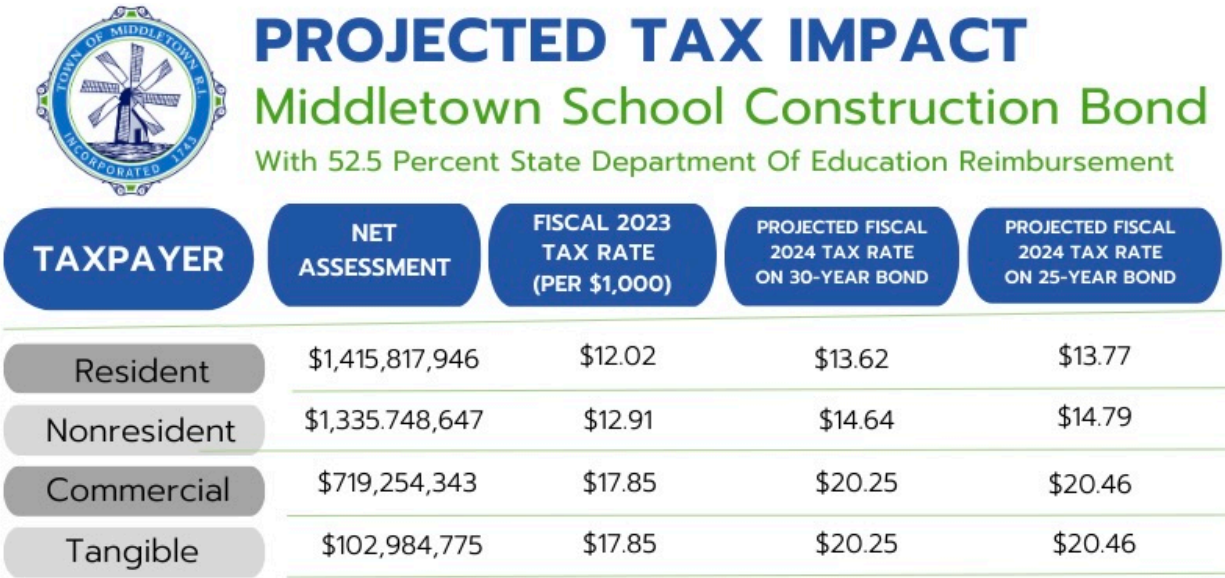
Question 10: Is there any way to lower costs here?

- We get it. No one wants to pay more than they have to for anything. We're no different here at the town. That's why our officials and legislators are working hard to get a 65 percent reimbursement from the state on this project, reducing our outlay by millions if approved. We're also scrutinizing every line item with our experts to

make sure we get the biggest bang for our buck while also giving our students and educators the best 21st century schools they need.

Question 11: What’s this bond going to cost me as an average Middletown homeowner?

- We know this is all some people care about — the bottom line. So, here’s a chart that breaks down everything simply and easily.



- If you want a more detailed report about the projected tax impact of this project, check out <https://mdl.town/TaxImpact> online. Obviously, as things move forward and we get closer to the special election, those numbers might be fine tuned. However, based on current calculations, the school bond is expected to cost the median taxpayer about \$2 a day, or around the price of a cup of coffee.

Question 12: I’ve been in the schools. They don’t look so bad. Why are we doing this?

- Yes, our school maintenance staff has done as much as they can to keep our current schools presentable and functioning. But again, as the November 2021 report showed, there are a lot of problems behind the scenes that need repair or replacing. Costly items like elevator overhauls, asbestos and mold remediation, air handling systems and other fixes are needed. To check out a copy of that report, visit <https://mdl.town/Report> online. With a new middle-high school, we’ll be getting 21st century learning environments to help our students grow, achieve and thrive.

Question 13: You’ve spent a lot of time speaking generally about how great this new school will be. What are we getting in this new building specifically?

- In addition to 21st century learning environments, the following assets are promised as part of the new middle-high school:

1. A community auditorium to replace the shared cafeteria-auditorium spaces in both schools currently.
2. Separate gymnasiums for middle and high school students — or potentially a field house — spaces along with new athletic fields for larger events.
3. Open, airy, bright environment throughout the entire 231,000-square-foot space.
4. Additional room for vocational-technical courses spaces that are presently lacking in our existing middle and high schools.
5. A state-of-the-art kitchen to provide students and staff the best food possible for their dollar, a place that could also double as an instructional area.

Question 14: During the regionalization dialogue, there were questions about the value of new schools on the education of Middletown children. Is there more information here?

- Inherently, any time students are in a new school designed to current standards, there's value to their education. Among those include:
 1. **A healthier environment** — Currently, staff and students need to open windows in most classrooms to get the proper air circulation. While some air handling systems have been improve, many do not work as well as they should. Many spaces also have persistent mold issues and aging sewer and water pipes have let go recently in Gaudet Middle School, creating unsanitary conditions. None of these situations alone would be tolerable in our homes. A new school would be designed to the current standards in all aspects.
 2. **A safer environment** — While the front entrances of our schools are largely secure, the rest of the buildings are not. There are far too many exterior doors and ways for bad actors to access our buildings too easily. Any new school built would dramatically limit the number of ways for the public to get in and out of the new middle-high school, offer better oversight by teachers and staff and provide the latest safety features.
 3. **New flexible learning spaces** — When our schools were built, education focused on the “cells and bells” model. That was where a teacher would stand at the head of the classroom, while students sat back and passively heard the lecture. Today’s education is far different. In most classrooms, students are collaborating and working together in ways to simulate a “real world” environment. While we’ve retrofitted some spaces like the kindergarten wing at Forest Avenue School and the Gaudet Learning Academy, most of our classrooms are cramped and not conducive to such group work. A new school would be designed with a multitude of flex learning areas.
 4. **More collaboration among students and teachers** — An outgrowth of flex learning spaces, right now the “cells and bells” model of classroom design does not allow for easy collaboration between teachers, even if there are natural curriculum connections between classrooms. The new school would be laid out to capitalize on collaboration whenever possible.
 5. **Latest technology** — Again, when our schools were built, the idea of the internet or smart phone technology was only in the realm of science fiction. And while we’ve done a good job integrating technology into every classroom, it’s far from

seamless and often awkward and bulky. A new school would be built from the ground up with technology woven into every aspect of the building.

6. **A school for all** — When our schools were built, the “Education For All Handicapped Children Act” was not even on the radar screen. Approved in 1975, the federal act gives all students the right to an equal education. And subsequent laws have further cemented those obligations, not to mention those who are not English speakers and other populations in today’s schools. A new building would be built with those requirements at the fore so everyone could get the best education possible.
7. **The school as a learning tool** — In today’s educational environment, many newer schools incorporate learning into the building itself. Whether its unique design attributes, capitalizing on alternative energy sources or other features, having a school students can learn from will be part of the new building.
8. **Middletown Pride** — An often overlooked educational attribute of any school is the sense of pride and place it instills in our students and staff. Walk into Middletown High or Gaudet Middle schools today and there’s little to distinguish the facility and the unique, special place of Middletown, Rhode Island. Really, the building could be here, upstate New York or Southern California. As part of any new school design, Middletown pride and branding will be featured throughout to help foster an inclusive, caring learning community.

Question 15: Didn’t we approve a \$10 million bond in November 2016 for school improvement work? Was that money wasted?

- No, that was money well spent. According to school officials and members of the volunteer School Building Committee, extensive roof repairs were done to the schools along with security improvements and other upgrades. School Building Committee Co-Chairman Charlie Roberts has said that work “saved our schools right now.” But at no time was the November 2016 bond considered a universal cure all to the school building woes. Instead, it was always billed as a stopgap measure until a more permanent solution was determined.

Question 16: So, what’s the projected impact on teachers and staffing?

- This is a good question. Sure, we’re moving from a separate high school and middle school into one building, but there are no changes anticipated to our staffing levels because our number of students isn’t expected to change.

Question 17: Are any services going to be reduced as a result of the new school?

- No. Actually, we’re going to be offering students more options and opportunities through the new middle-high school. More electives, more focus on “hands-on” courses that the students crave, more career ready pathways, more of what the students want and need to succeed in today’s 21st century world.

Question 18: How is this possible without driving up costs?

- A couple of ways. First, by rolling back any savings from reduced maintenance costs into our classrooms, our students win. Instead of paying for a new gym floor at Gaudet after a pipe burst, that money would go into each of our classrooms. Also, by

having the middle and high schools work more closely together, we'll be able to deploy our existing staff more effectively, meaning more opportunities for students.

Question 19: Right now, grades 4 and 5 are in the Gaudet Learning Academy. What happens to those students once the project is completed?

- Another good question. Right now, the plan is to take \$20 million from the overall bond and invest that money into updating and improving the Middletown High School campus on Valley Road. That money could go a long way towards stabilizing that location as the future pre-kindergarten through fifth grade learning center for Middletown for generations to come. Long term, by not spending money on the existing Aquidneck and Forest Avenue schools, it prevents taxpayers from investing in those buildings long term when plans are to retire them from educational uses as soon as possible.

Question 20: So, during construction, my child is going to be in a temporary classroom trailer, right?

- Nope. One thing that's great about the way this project is phased is that no classroom will ever be housed in a trailer or other temporary classroom. Instead, we'll be using our existing schools to provide the most stable, reliable experience to students and staff to eliminate any interruptions to their education during construction.

Question 21: What happens to the athletic fields that will be displaced by this project?

- Middletown values our open spaces and fields. Whenever we do a project that impacts those areas, we find suitable replacements that equal — or surpass — the fields that are being lost. This project is no different than any of the others.

Question 22: Are you really going to deliver on everything you're proposing here?

- In a word, yes. We've seen the news too, where other communities approve a project only to get a shell of what was originally discussed. Here, we don't do that. Everything that's on the table will be delivered because of the world-class management and oversight, but most importantly because it's what we promised.

Question 23: Does the new school have a name?

- Not yet, but momentum seems to be building around "The Middletown School — A Grade 6-12 Learning Community."

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