



**Town of Ridgefield  
Public Hearing Minutes  
UNAPPROVED**

**December 18, 2024 at 7:30pm**

Please note – these minutes are not verbatim.

**Present:** Sean Connelly, Maureen Kozlark, Rudy Marconi, Chris Murray

**Present via Zoom:** Barbara Manners

Rudy Marconi called Public Hearing to order at 7:30pm.

Mr. Marconi shared this Public Hearing is to discuss “the Resolution appropriating \$275,000 for the costs related to design and planning of a new Alternative High School and Transition Program Building.” Mr. Marconi clarified the address for this proposed location is on Prospect Ridge (with the formal address being 34 Halpin Lane) and this is not part of the property purchased using Federal funds for the purpose of recreation and/or open space.

Mr. Marconi also clarified this is not a new appropriation, this appropriation was previously approved to expand the existing Alternative High School (A-School) space at Ballard Green, and those funds are being requested to be reallocated.

Mr. Marconi further explained the various properties and locations considered by Ridgefield Public Schools (RPS) and the Board of Education (BOE), including St. Stephen’s Church, 66 Grove Street, the Venus Building, Prospect Ridge (site of previously proposed commuter lot), the previously proposed pickleball court location, then the current proposed location at 34 Halpin Lane.

Sean Connelly shared the \$275,000 will be used toward the design and planning of the building, but the BOS does not anticipate the design work to cost more than \$50,000-\$80,000.

Mr. Marconi reiterated that the original resolution was for the design and planning for the existing A-School space, and that remains true for this new resolution. Mr. Marconi shared remaining funds would be transferred into the next phase of the project to reduce the money requested for construction costs.

Chris Murray shared the \$275,000 appropriation would be used to create a design and plan that would then be presented to the Town, along with the estimated total project cost, for residents to be able to make an informed decision and vote on the proposed project.

## 1. Public Comment

Debra Francheschini, 22 Spire View Road, expressed confusion about the process, specifically why the proposed space does not offer space for pre-school. Mr. Marconi shared the BOE's request was to secure additional space for the A-School, Transition Program, and pre-school, but the A-School and Transition Program were deemed most pressing by Superintendent Dr. Susie Da Silva. Ms. Francheschini asked how much the proposed A-School and Transition Program school will cost. Mr. Marconi confirmed an estimate will be available when the project goes to vote.

Sean Archambault, 85 Ramapoo Road, expressed discomfort with the situation, and how the need for new space has become so urgent. Mr. Archambault voiced confusion about not being able to use the existing space at Ridgefield High School (RHS) and placing the A-School and Transition Program students further from the school. Mr. Archambault proposed building an annex on the RHS property to help integrate students into the broader school community, and reappropriate the funds to conduct an in-depth needs assessment using the existing space.

Jay Klarsfeld, 129 Nod Hill Road, asked whether this project is still on the tight timeline that was voiced during the Special Town Meeting on October 9, 2024. Mr. Marconi confirmed the tight timeline still exists, the Town maintains its target to have the space ready for September 1, 2025, but there may be costs associated with temporary outplacements until the building is complete.

Andrew Sternlieb, 62 Ridgecrest Drive, suggested the architects consider a factory-built building for a faster construction timeline and more reasonable price. Mr. Marconi shared they explored that option first, and were quoted \$600/sqft, compared to \$350/sqft for stick-built construction.

Daniel Mann, 66 Grove Street, expressed the 66 Grove Street lease remains on the table and his doubt the proposed building would be completed by November 2025. Mr. Mann shared, per the State, construction costs average \$670/sqft, and shared the 66 Grove Street lease remains a more cost-effective option and offers additional room to grow in the future. Mr. Marconi shared he asked Kevin Redmond, Finance Director, to analyze the costs associated with both locations, and even if the Town paid \$800,000 of outplacement fees for the upcoming school year, the Town would save \$500,000-\$2,000,000 over the next 10-15 years, and own the building.

Michele Christ, 9 Longview Drive, expressed support for reappropriating the funds, and for the Town to own and have full control over the building. Ms. Christ asked Dr. Da Silva and the BOE to clear up misconceptions about the A-School and Transition Programs, the needs being served, and how the programs function. Ms. Christ expressed tonight's vote is not about whether the Town is going to build the proposed building, but a vote to plan the building. Mr. Marconi confirmed the funds would be for design and planning, and once the plans were complete, an estimator would provide a full construction quote to be made available to the public.

John Collins, 34 Langstroth Drive, shared this is his 15<sup>th</sup> year as a RISE parent, and expressed some of the videos being circulated online are inappropriate and offensive. Mr. Collins expressed appreciation for the critical thinking of the RPS, BOE, and BOS.

Matt Blumrich, 76 Florida Hill Road, read a statement asking those present to vote no on behalf of the A-School. Mr. Blumrich expressed concerns about A-School students' ability to access RHS for electives and extracurriculars, and shared isolating A-School students goes against modern best practices, which indicate A-School students should be in RHS or as close as possible.

Michael Raduazzo, 195 Peaceable Street, asked the BOS to confirm what the \$275,000 reappropriation would fund. Mr. Marconi confirmed the design and planning of the proposed school. Mr. Raduazzo confirmed the \$275,000 was originally bonded for the design and planning for the addition at Ballard Green, and asked whether that project had been closed. Mr. Marconi indicated it had not yet been closed, but it would be closed. Mr. Raudazzo questioned whether the \$275,000 appropriation is an appropriate amount of funds, or if it's an over-appropriation. Mr. Marconi shared this appropriation is per bond counsel's recommendation and language.

Mark Seavy, 88 Soundview Road, expressed his support for the proposal, and expressed that the school population seems to ebb and flow, and given how many young families have recently moved into the community, the Town needs to be thinking ahead for future needs. Mr. Seavy expressed there may be space at the schools now, but that will change with time.

Aimee Cohen, 76 Florida Hill Road, shared she previously approached Dr. Da Silva about alleged Federal law violations at the current A-School, who shared they would be remedied over time. Ms. Cohen advocated for the A-School to be at RHS for an equitable, integrated environment, and asked those present to vote no so the Town could do better for both student populations.

Cheryl Boyd, 9 Ridgewood Road, shared her son went to the A-School, has a successful IT career now, and saw many of the students who were social and strong in other ways. Ms. Boyd shared many of her son's peers were unable to take advantage of activities and programs, and feels, looking back, having access to extracurricular programming would have been beneficial.

Angela Rice, 237 Branchville Road, expressed concern about mischaracterizing the BOE both student populations, and it's unfair to say the BOS and BOE are not operating in the best interest of the students. Ms. Rice expressed the right to question, but feels we should listen if all aligned.

Kirk Carr, 62 Prospect Ridge, supported Mr. Raduazzo's comments about this \$275,000 appropriation request being an over-appropriation. Mr. Carr voiced concern about the A-School and Transition Program students being offsite from RHS. Mr. Carr shared he has great respect for the administration, but reasonable people can disagree, and asked those present to vote no.

Gregory McLaughlin, 93 Hunter Lane, shared this vote is a plan versus not having a plan.

Elizabeth DiSalvo, White Birch Road, asked whether Dr. Da Silva could share why it's important for the A-School to be located off-campus. Dr. Da Silva shared, in her experience, a small minority of students want to be at RHS, but most want a separate setting with a smaller student population. Dr. Da Silva shared some A-School students transition back to RHS, and RPS is able to transport students who choose to participate in RHS activities and programming. Dr. Da Silva shared A-School students deserve a space that can programmatically meet their needs.

Kirk Carr, 62 Prospect Ridge, shared on November 12, 2024, the BOE released its enrolment projections through 2035, showing enrolment peaked in 2009 and current enrolment is down ~19% from that peak, and projected to be flat for the next 10 years. Mr. Carr shared the BOE's 2016 facility report shows RHS can hold an additional 1,000 students, and expressed perhaps the existing space hasn't been properly stewarded.

Debra Francheschini, 22 Spire View Road, showed the site plan for the proposed building from the December 17, 2024 Planning & Zoning Meeting, which shows two classrooms upstairs and 4 classrooms downstairs, and asked where the pre-school would be located. Mr. Marconi confirmed the BOE gives requirements for the interior of the school.

Daniel Mann, 66 Grove Street, asked whether this \$275,000 appropriation would be general or specific to Halpin Lane. Mr. Marconi confirmed it would be specific to 34 Halpin Lane.

Matt Blumrich, 76 Florida Hill Road, expressed distrust in Dr. Da Silva's portrayal of A-School families being happy. Mr. Blumrich asked the BOE to provide a report about why it is better for the A-School and Transition Program to be at a remote location.

Andrew Terzis, 9 Palmer Court, asked about the feasibility of expanding the footprint at 34 Halpin Lane, should the school need additional space. Mr. Marconi confirmed there has not been a feasibility study, but there is room to expand to the north, toward the Bark Park, but not to the south due to a deed restriction on the property.

Aimee Cohen, 76 Florida Hill Road, shared Disability Rights Connecticut, Partners in Policymaking, and the UConn Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service all oppose an A-School being separated from the mainstream school.

John Collins, 34 Langstroth Drive, voiced he strongly opposes anyone in the community who personally attacks educators and administrators, whether or not you agree with their decisions.

Cheryl Boyd, 9 Ridgewood Road, shared a document with the BOS about the value of integration in schools.

Michele Christ, 9 Longview Drive, shared she's a diversity, equity, and inclusion specialist at Boehringer-Ingelheim, and shared inclusion is the goal and gold standard in special education, and shared there is overlap between special education and the A-School, but they have been conflated in this discussion. Ms. Christ shared an alternative setting is not necessarily inequitable, and not completely supported by the goals of A-School programming.

Mr. Marconi closed the Public Hearing at 8:48pm.

***Maureen Kozlark motioned to adjourn the Special Town Meeting at 9:11pm. Sean Connelly seconded the motion. Motion carried 4-0.***