



DATE: MAY 26, 2022
TO: CITY COUNCIL
FROM: JEFF BAGG, CITY PLANNER
RE: ELEMENTARY SCHOOL REUSE – REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP) & DISPOSITION

Dear City Council members,

The Planning Department is excited to transmit a draft Request for Proposal (RFP) package associated with the reuse of the City's three elementary schools. As introduced to the City Council during your March 9, 2022 meeting by the committee Chairperson, Joe McCoy, the goal of the reuse committee was to gather and prepare information, and formulate a community driven and comprehensive draft RFP for review and consideration by City Council. An FAQ was also prepared by the committee to help answer many of the questions raised by the community or anticipated to be raised during the disposition process.

Enclosed in this packet is the following information:

- Draft Elementary School Reuse RFP dated May 26, 2022
- Elementary School FAQ
- Draft City Council Resolution and Votes
- City Attorney memorandum, May 26, 2021

The RFP - and all its associated materials - are the result of more than three years of community input, technical planning efforts, and concerted effort to allow for the most successful reuse of these important City properties.

It is anticipated that this item will be referred to a subcommittee of the City Council prior to any action by the full City Council.

Background

The Planning Department, the Mayor's office, and others have been preparing for the reuse of three elementary school properties since 2018. The effort consists of several projects:

Downtown Strategic Plan - After a year-long planning process, the Easthampton Downtown Strategic Plan was completed in early 2020 and provides strategies to enhance economic development opportunities in the Downtown and strengthen the Cottage Street and Union Street corridor as a commercial center and a creative heart of the community. The Plan was funded by a \$50,000 Planning Grant through the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (with a \$15,000 match from the City's Zoning Incentive Fund) in 2019 and establishes coordinated vision and action items for the Downtown including redevelopment opportunities, shared parking, and pedestrian enhancements. Chapter 5 of the Downtown Plan is devoted to the Elementary Schools. To view the Plan, review community meeting materials, or watch videos, click [here](#).



Housing Production Plan - In 2021, the City completed an update to its Housing Production Plan - a comprehensive collection of demographic and housing data and guide for the construction of affordable housing in Easthampton. The Plan was funded by a \$35,000 Planning Grant from the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (with a \$15,000 match grant from the CPA committee) in 2020. The three elementary schools (along with several other sites) are identified as suitable for affordable housing. To view the City's Housing Production Plan, click [here](#) (the schools are discussed on pages 54-58).

Elementary School Reuse Committee - Also during the past 1-2 years, the Planning Department has been working with a consultant and the City's Elementary School Reuse Committee to prepare a Request For Proposal (RFP) for the redevelopment of the schools. This element of the project is funded by a \$21,000 grant from the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs granted to the Planning Department (with a \$5,000 match from the City's Zoning Incentive Fund) in 2021. The Committee was charged with preparing an RFP that seeks the most community benefit for the City. As a result of their work, the conversion of the schools into affordable housing has become the top priority for the RFP.

To watch previous committee meetings and access all other relevant information about the RFP, please go to the Elementary School Reuse Committee webpage [here](#).

The current membership for the committee is:

- Joe McCoy - Chair
- Brad Riley - City Council/Affordable Fair Housing Partnership
- Chris Korzcak - Economic Development and Industrial Committee (EDIC)
- Patrick Brough - Council on Aging
- Pamela Means - Resident
- Lauren Clark - Resident

MassDevelopment Technical Assistance – As approved by City Council at its February 2, 2022 meeting, the Planning Department has been working with MassDevelopment to gather critical information about the schools in preparation of the RFP. The project with MassDevelopment provides approximately \$61,000 worth of technical support at no-cost to the City for the completion of existing condition land surveys of the school properties and the surrounding neighborhood, baseline evaluation of the condition of underground infrastructure (water, sewer, drainage), appraisals for each property, and a conceptual “fit test” for the sites and conceptual neighborhood infrastructure improvement plans and cost estimates. All of this information is included and/or referenced in the RFP and will provide valuable information to potential developers.

Easthampton CPA- Affordable Housing Pre-Development – The project is funded by an approximately \$83,000 grant from CPA approved by City Council on August 4, 2021 and is aimed at planning and pre-development tasks necessary for the creation of new affordable rental housing in Easthampton. As a part of the project, Valley CDC examined the school buildings to help determine a preliminary number of units that could be potentially accommodated.



The report also provides a sample budget pro forma using state, federal and local dollars to demonstrate the potential cost and sources of funds to create affordable housing within the school buildings.

RFP components

The RFP document has been prepared over the past year through a public process with the Elementary School Reuse Committee. The overarching goal of the RFP is to seek the redevelopment of the schools as affordable housing. The goal became more acute as a result of the pandemic and upon completion of the Housing Production Plan. The recommendation for the RFP is that this goal be the only required element of the RFP. Other elements identified in the community engagement such as public parking, a public park/playground at each site, and/or the preservation of the Pepin Gym are identified in the RFP as desirable community benefits. The general structure of the RFP is to create a ranking system whereby responses containing certain elements will score higher than others. This structure (flexibility and using evaluation criteria) was identified as a high priority as part of the Downtown Strategic Plan and has been carried through the current RFP.

These evaluation criteria include, but are not limited:

- *Affordable housing* – The provision of affordable housing is required with the provision of a wide range of incomes being “highly advantageous” since it is what Easthampton needs the most.
- *Community connections* – The provision for public parking, a public park, and/or a publicly accessible gymnasium/theater space are specifically listed throughout the RFP. A proposal that includes one or two community elements is “advantageous” whereas a proposal including three or community elements are “highly advantageous”.
- *Environmental sustainability* – A proposal is expected to at least be eligible for various existing certifications to be considered “advantageous” or commits to applying for and receiving them to be considered “highly advantageous”. Throughout the process it was identified that the renovation of existing buildings such as the schools could be extremely difficult to achieve certification such as LEED.
- *Retention of existing buildings* – A proposal can retain all three buildings and achieve a “highly advantageous” ranking. This was based on community input on the importance of how the buildings fit into the neighborhoods
- *New construction* – A proposal can include demolition of one or more of the buildings. However, to achieve a highly advantageous ranking such a proposal would need to increase the number of affordable units, achieve LEED or other sustainability certification, provide a park, public parking, and a community space.

One of the key features of the RFP, as drafted, is flexibility. The importance of this feature must be highlighted. Easthampton is inviting potential entities to invest millions and years into providing a project (s) that will fulfill our goals. Unfortunately, the unpredictability and high costs associated with construction will require Easthampton to work even harder to offer the most compelling opportunity for reuse of schools.



The City needs the RFP to offer the flexibility so that a team will choose Easthampton over any other community in the Commonwealth and ensure that any requirements of the RFP are financial feasible. The RFP as written anticipates accomplishing several community goals through the use of clear weighted evaluation criteria.

Two documents have been prepared that may provide additional background on the municipal disposition and RFP processes (both are available on the project webpage):

- Memorandum – [Disposition Process and Timeline, June 29, 2021](#)
- Memorandum – [White paper on Precedents, June 29, 2021](#)

School Committee

The School Committee voted on April 12, 2022 to declare the properties surplus and transfer the property to City Council. To allow for the development and consideration of the RFP by City Council before the schools are empty, the vote includes a final “condition precedent” occur before the process is effective. In essence, this offers flexibility to the School Department to empty the schools and allows the City Council to review and vote to release the RFP concurrently. The final action needed will be a letter from the School Committee to the City Council that the schools have been emptied and are no longer needed for school purposes. That is anticipated to be mid-July. Both the School Committee and City Council votes are structured to allow the release of the RFP prior to that time if applicable.

City Council votes & actions

A memo from the City Attorney dated May 26, 2021 is included in this packet. It provides a summary of the municipal process and required actions to dispose of a municipal property. A draft resolution and draft votes to be completed by City Council is also attached.

In summary, the City Council is being asked to take several actions:

1. To accept the schools as no longer necessary for school use.
2. To declare the schools surplus property.
3. To authorize the Mayor to circulate and publish the RFP (this steps involves the concurrence of the City Council with the contents of the RFP).
4. That a review committee shall provide written recommendations to City Council identifying a preferred proposal.

As identified in the draft RFP, a subsequent final action by City Council will be to vote to accept the recommendation from the review committee and to authorize the Mayor to enter into such transactions as necessary to effectuate the final selection process.

Sincerely,

Jeff Bagg
City Planner