

Wellesley High School Project: The Importance of Site

Will Wellesley build a new high school or renovate/add on to what we have?

One important factor is the availability and accessibility of appropriate land. Over several years the School Committee has investigated both Town-owned and local college land large enough for a new school, and has analyzed the current site for its “buildability”. The Town concluded in the first endeavor that there are no other appropriate sites available for a new school.

So, what do we have to work with and why?

In September 2006, the School Committee assembled an inter-board working group to take a comprehensive, fresh look at all land adjacent to WHS for project purposes. This working group included representatives from the School Committee, Board of Selectmen, Natural Resources Commission (NRC), Recreation Commission, Planning Board, Board of Public Works, Wetlands Protection Committee, and Historical Commission. The group also received assistance from Town Counsel.

Wellesley High School (WHS) sits on 13.5 acres of School-owned land comprised of building, parking lots, and vegetated woodlands, and is adjacent to approximately 20 usable acres of playing fields at Hunnewell Field.

Building in this area has significant complexities: the brooks, streams, pond, wetlands, and floodplain are protected by state statute and local bylaws. Year-round brooks and rivers are protected by the Massachusetts Rivers Protection Act specifying a “*riverfront area*”, a 200-foot buffer zone on each side of the waterway. Nearby marshes and vegetated areas bordering perennial and intermittent streams are protected by the Wetlands Protection Act as “*resource areas*” with a 100-foot buffer zone. The “*floodplain*” is defined by the National Flood Insurance Program and the Town of Wellesley. (Note: all of the high school property and a large portion of Hunnewell Field are in a floodplain.)

Each designation carries its own regulations and performance standards for work to remove, fill, dredge, or alter them in addition to extensive permitting and oversight. For example, any filling of bordering vegetated *wetlands* requires that a replacement wetland be created relatively near the filled area. A *floodplain* area may be filled only if another area of the same volume is excavated within or adjacent to the floodplain. In a *riverfront area*, restrictions might be relaxed for re-development of a use that was in place before the laws were enacted.

School Site Analysis

(A) *West side*: A large portion of the parking lot is within the Fuller Brook *riverfront area*. However, since the parking lot is a pre-existing use, re-development of this area is likely (permitting required).

(B) *East side*: Although the school has more land there, the 1956 wing and the Wilbury Crockett Library are already within the wetlands *resource area*. These additions were built before the

current laws were enacted, allowing for the possibility of relaxed rules for appropriate re-development.

It is highly unlikely that the physical plant could be extended west (A) of the main parking lot or east (B) of the existing footprint.

(C) **North side (the front)**, which includes a small triangular parcel across Rice Street: Caroline Brook and major utility lines run across the front of the school. Aside from a small portion of land in the circular driveway area at the front of the school, recovering other buildable land on the Rice/Paine side of the school would be too costly and complicated for the limited gain.

(D) **South side**: This side abuts a portion of Seaver Street, three private residences on Seaver, and a 3.5 acre parcel between the parking lot and Seaver, now referred to as the “Selectmen’s Parcel”. (The ropes course is currently on part of the Selectmen’s Parcel.) The three private residences abutting both the School property and the Selectmen’s Parcel are all occupied. These parcels extend into the main area of buildable land, yielding design challenges. A substantial portion of the Selectmen’s Parcel is situated in the *riverfront area*, and there is a drainage ditch that requires *wetlands* review. The Selectmen’s Parcel is currently being studied for definitive identification of restrictions and potential for use.

(E) **Hunnewell Field**, comprised of both designated *Playground and Parkland areas*: The Field is controlled by the Wellesley NRC and protected as “**Open Space**” by a 1972 Amendment to Article 97 of the Massachusetts Constitution. To remove this land from protected status today would require 1) that there be no other option to meet the needs of the high school; 2) a majority vote of NRC, a two-thirds vote of Town Meeting, a two-thirds roll call vote of the Massachusetts State Legislature, and the governor’s approval; and 3) extensive permitting hurdles around the rivers, wetlands, and floodplain issues. The time required to attempt this non-promising approach was estimated to be about five years. The working group concluded this was not a viable option to pursue.

Results

The environmental and legislative restrictions make this a particularly difficult site for planning a new or enlarged high school. The Land Use Working Group concluded that the only real potential for additional, permanently usable land is a small portion in the front of the building and an undetermined portion of the Selectmen’s Parcel.

The School Building Committee is now managing further studies on these identified potential sites, as required for consideration of funding by the Massachusetts School Building Authority.

Marlene Allen is a School Committee member and chaired the Land Use Working Group.

