

EASTFORD SCHOOL COMMUNITY
CONVERSATION SUMMARY REPORT
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INTRODUCTION

The town of Eastford is currently discussing the physical condition of Eastford Elementary School as well as the options to address the school building's problems and the growing and changing needs of Eastford's schoolchildren. This Community Conversation was initiated to discuss the issues facing the school and options currently being considered to address these problems. The purpose of the Community Conversation was not to make a decision but instead was a means to help the community become informed about the school facilities and the options to address the problems with the school. The three options being considered by the Building Facilities Committee are to renovate the current school, build a new school, or to build a regional school with the town of Pomfret. The Community Conversation was held April 30, 2009 at the Eastford Elementary School. . Throughout this document, points of discussion are numbered. Note that numbering does not reflect the preference or value of one idea over another, but is instead a means to make the information more accessible to the reader.

PARTICIPANTS

In creating a list of members to participate in the community conversation, the planning committee was careful to include as diverse a group as possible considering the make-up of the town of Eastford. As a town, Eastford is fairly homogenous in terms of race and socioeconomic status. There is more diversity in terms of level of education and age. The planning committee also tried to insure that there was diversity in terms of political affiliation. Almost all of the residents who attended reflected the demographic makeup of the town, with a range in terms of socioeconomic status, age and education. Small groups were set up with the aim of separating married couples (so that there would be different opinions in each group). Groups were also set up so that there was a range in ages among participants and also so that attendants with children in the school were mixed with those who had no children, had adult children, or whose children were in high school.

CENTRAL ISSUES

During the large group meeting that followed the small group discussions, it was clear that the concerns and values among the participants are remarkably similar. The most common of concerns and values are as follows:

1. Almost universally, the participants agreed that there is great value in Eastford School's size. Participants spoke of the wonderful sense of community at the school, that the students know each other and (generally) look out for each other, and that the teachers and staff know the children. This, all agreed, has led to the success of Eastford's students.
2. Participants praised the teachers, staff and administration at Eastford School and believe the teachers are doing a great job.
3. Everyone agreed that the physical condition of the school has problems that need to be addressed. They were concerned that the building be safe, up to code, and adequate for the children.
4. Most participants agreed that the school needs to have more space for the demands of today's education: there is not enough space for special education, technology, extra-curricular activities, storage, and the needs of a growing town. Having a real lunchroom was also mentioned.
5. In general, people agreed that older children (grades 5 and up) need to have more enrichment options. These options should include more foreign languages, opportunities for music, art and drama, and increased sports options.
6. Each group discussed the costs of the various options. Although all believed money should be spent on the school (and in some cases it should be a priority), there was not enough information about the costs of each option available.
7. Universally, each group voiced concern about the loss of community, identity and voice if a merger with Pomfret was made. However, they also considered that there may be more activities and options available to students with a merger.
8. Participants felt that Eastford offers some options, such as a before and after school program, that Pomfret does not. Parents who use this program are concerned about what they will do if Eastford merges with Pomfret.
9. The cost of transportation as well as the hours children will spend on the bus also are issues for people if Pomfret and Eastford regionalize.
10. Universally, participants were concerned about what would happen to the present elementary school building if the town were to either regionalize or build a new school.
11. Overall, attendees agreed that it is teachers, not a building, that make a good education. Small class size, a small school, attention from teachers and interaction with parents is what has made Eastford students successful.

12. Some discussion seems to lean towards the positives of having a cooperative middle school with Pomfret rather than K-8, since middle school students have special needs and need more cultural and educational opportunities. Attendees noted that a cooperative middle school would allow more opportunities but many were concerned it wouldn't be as ideal for the younger children.
13. Whatever choice the town makes, environmental choices are important (making buildings more energy efficient, using solar power, etc.).

QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

The questions raised by the small groups fall mainly under the logistics and costs of each of the options being discussed by the town. Because of the current economy and the changing costs of building materials as well as the amount of money the state of Connecticut will be able to reimburse for projects, participants felt there was a lot of information missing that is needed to make a good decision. Several of the groups had members who are on the Building Facilities Committee, so these members were able to answer some of these questions in several of the groups. However, the specific numbers were still missing, partly because of the changing economic time. Participants felt it was important for the greater community to have these answers. The questions and concerns raised by the groups are summarized as follows:

1. How much will each option cost overall? How much will the state of Connecticut help fund each project and what kind of burden will the cost place on the taxpayers? Participants felt that they (and the greater community as a whole) would need real numbers laid out in comparison in order to be well-informed about the process, especially when it came time for a town vote.
2. How will the current economic crisis affect the choice the town makes?
3. If the town chooses renovation, how will this be done? Will it be done in small sections or as needed? If there are large renovations, what will happen to the students while these are going on? How long will these renovations take?
4. Where would a new building be constructed? How much would buying the land cost in addition to construction materials?
5. What would happen to the present school if the town builds a new school or regionalizes? Even if the building is used as a town office building, senior center, or for other town events, the building still needs to be renovated and maintained. Is there money to do all of these things?

6. If Eastford regionalizes with Pomfret, how much will the town pay for this and how much in-put will the town have in educational matters/discussions? There is a great deal of concern that Eastford will lose its power and ability to make decisions. More information is needed on the power sharing between the towns.
7. There was a concern about the fate of Eastford's teachers if there is regionalization and also the size of classes and the number of classes for each grade. What would the logistics be for regionalization?
8. What is the future of the educational program in Eastford?
9. What or where are the town's priorities?
10. How can we help our students to gain the skills they need and insure that they are competitive? How can we give them the technological skills they need to be successful? Where will the money come for this?
11. Some participants voiced concern about the cost for retired persons in the community who are struggling today to survive. How can we do what needs to be done without overburdening people who are struggling?
12. What are the other demands on the town budget and how will this affect choices for education?
13. Could regionalization work with other towns rather than Pomfret? Has this been looked into?
14. What will Eastford's demographics be like in the future? Is the projected student enrollment higher or lower than today?

IDEAS AND ACTION STEPS

In their discussions about the next steps to be taken following this conversation, participants noted the following ideas:

1. Universally, all of the small groups agreed that the next step to be taken in this discussion is to give the townspeople more information. Participants want hard numbers and facts in order to make comparisons and informed decisions. The town should hire an architect, contractors, etc. to come up with actual numbers available to the public.
2. Another important step is to keep the town informed about what is going on. One group suggested that the town or the school keep people informed about what is going on by posting information on their web sites and keep the information updated. Overall, the

groups felt that it is important that the greater community truly be informed and that the town keep them informed about options for the school on an on-going basis.

3. The groups also agreed that they would like to see the actual projected number of students the school expects in the future. Is the student population projected to go up or down? It is important to know this in order to decide what to do.
4. Another important step, along with costs and projected student numbers, is a timeline for the proposed projects as well as what will happen to our students if the town chooses to renovate.
5. Participants also want their views to be heard by the Selectmen and the School Facilities Committee, and want to know the Selectman's priorities about education.
6. Several groups suggested that Eastford look at what other towns are doing to improve education. Are new buildings or regionalization working elsewhere? The town should visit these schools and send out questionnaires. How are students in other towns doing?
7. One group also discussed grants and felt that an important next step would be to look into grant money that is available.

FINAL SUMMARY

In conclusion, the participants in the Community Conversation agreed that Eastford School's building has problems that need to be addressed. They agreed that codes should be updated, the school should be safe, that there is a need for more (or differently configured) space to increase the school's offerings. They also agreed that it is important that the school have current technology to enhance education. Most agreed that education should be a priority for the town and it is important to spend money on the school. At the same time, they also are aware of the current economic crisis and the fact that many people are struggling. As the aim of the discussion was just the exchange of ideas, no decision was made as to what the town should do. However, it was clear that the participants value the small community at Eastford School, the teachers, and the class sizes. They noted that the students from Eastford School are successful and confident when they leave, and, for the most part, do well in high school. However, the need for more enrichment was a constant theme in the discussion, especially for the older students. Participants wanted to be sure that students are prepared and can compete once they leave Eastford. Most of all, the participants wanted more information. They wanted to know how much every option will cost, what the logistics of the projects are and more information on the demographics of the town. They also wanted to make sure the

townspeople are kept informed. In the end, they wanted to be able to make an intelligent and informed decision, keeping in mind what is best for the children and considering the needs of the town.