

COMMITTEE INTERIM REPORT

From: 21 Highland Street Future Use Committee
To: Southborough Select Board
February 28, 2025

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I. BACKGROUND and COMMITTEE CHARGE

In October 2023, in response to public requests, the Select Board (SB) voted to approve the charge of a new ad hoc committee to study and make recommendations on how the municipal property located at 21 Highland Street including the historic South Union School Building and former Arts and Community Center could be used. The 21 Highland Future Use Committee was to be comprised of the following members:

- 2 residents who live within ½ mile of the property (*Current: Destin Heilman, Albenia Phillipo*)
- 1 at large member (*Open*)
- One representative each from:
 - The Planning Board (*Current: Lisa Braccio*)
 - The Open Space Preservation Commission (*Current: Freddie Gillespie*)
 - The Historical Commission (*Current: Kevin Miller*)
 - The Recreation Commission (*Current: Kristin LaVault*)

The Board agreed to the following charge:

“There shall be an Ad Hoc Committee established to make recommendations related to the future use of the South Union School. The committee’s charge shall expire on June 30, 2025. The committee shall be guided as follows:

1. The committee may make recommendations related to the town-owned property at the site provided that:
 - The playground must be maintained. If necessary, it may be moved.
 - The sledding hill must be maintained.
2. Parking for the playground and any future use must be provided.
3. The committee may consider uses that would require faster conversion than the 4–5-year timeframe envisions. If considered a plan should be developed for the rehousing of the existing occupants.
4. Any future use of the building that requires regular occupancy must bring the building up to modern energy efficiency standards and building codes.
5. The committee may make use of the technical resources of the town in its deliberations provided that the provision of said resources are approved by either the Town Administrator or the Select Board.
6. The committee should attempt to find alternative sources of funding for any proposed use. The committee should be mindful that any request for taxpayer funding must be judged against other competing priorities. The committee is reminded that other neighborhoods in our town have far fewer public amenities (playgrounds, parks, open space) than exist in this neighborhood.

The committee shall make a final report to the Select Board no later than June 30, 2025, and an interim recommendation no later than February 28, 2025. Said reports shall cover alternative uses that will enjoy broad community support. The committee shall hold at least one public forum related to its recommendations.”

The following Interim Report captures discussions to date focused on a current state analysis of the property and the plan to identify potential uses and recommendations in the allotted timeframe.

II. DEPENDENCIES and ASSUMPTIONS

- a. Future use opportunities will clarify and take into consideration the current state of the building, future capital needs, and operating costs with formal validation by town and independent technical resources as needed.

- b. Any decisions on the future use of the 21 Highland Street property and the Recreation Building (formerly the South Union School, and the Arts and Community Center) should be dependent on decisions related to the proposed Neary School reconstruction project and proposed repurposing of Finn School to a Community Center; both will impact financial and available municipal space considerations.
- c. The final report by the Committee will take into consideration the town's vote at the May 10 Special Town Meeting and/or the May 13 ballot question regarding the proposed Neary School project and be adjusted as needed prior to submission.
- d. All potential options for the building as raised by committee members or the public will receive an initial assessment and be included in the report. These include:
 - i. Community and/or town services use
 - ii. Affordable housing
 - iii. Commercial leasing
 - iv. Sale
 - v. Hybrid approaches
 - vi. Other
- e. The final report will include, but not be limited to:
 - i. Structural Integrity Assessment
 - ii. Historical Significance Evaluation
 - iii. Open Space Significance Evaluation
 - iv. Recreational Significance Evaluation
 - v. Market Analysis (commercial demand, arts and cultural needs, non-profit interest, etc.)
 - vi. Financial Analysis
 - vii. Community input
 - viii. Evaluation Criteria
 - ix. Recommendation/s

III. BUILDING CURRENT STATE ANALYSIS

There have been long-standing questions and discussions about the current state of the Recreation Building located at 21 Highland Street and the associated maintenance costs. To date, the Committee has focused on conducting a current state analysis of the building, including associated costs, and developing a plan to then educate the community and solicit feedback on potential future uses. Below is a sample of initial findings, to be confirmed by

the town's Director of Facilities and, if needed, a feasibility study and/or independent structural evaluation. Such a study has been discussed in the past and would require Select Board approval and funding.

During the November 18, 2024 Committee meeting, John Parent, the current Director of Facilities, provided a tour of the building to the Committee and members of the public in attendance. Below is a high-level summary of some of the points discussed. A more extensive review will be included in the final report that will be validated by appropriate parties to ensure accuracy.

- In general, the building has “strong bones”; most of the investments needed are cosmetic. The town has already reinvested in the building, most recently to repaint window trims.
- CPA funds have been applied in the past for building maintenance, the playground, windows, and elevator repairs. The total amount of CPC funds applied to date will be included in the final report.
- For its current use, the building is up to code based on current building regulations.
- Questions have been raised on the condition of the basement. The space is dry, and currently houses town paper supplies and documentation. Recreation also uses the space for pottery classes.
- There is no need for asbestos repair/remediation.
- There are no major, immediate capital commitments or needs forecasted for the next several years; the next anticipated large spend is planned for 2034 (roof replacement; a common requirement for all buildings).
- The potential exists for the installation of a solar array and heat pumps given the space available, introducing the potential to self-fund electricity and heat, and meeting efficiency needs.
- Recent renovations for Youth and Family Services focused on their office space. With their planned relocation, the space could be used for other town services, committees, or commissions.
- The property holds the only public playground available during school hours and public meeting space on the south side of town.

IV. DATA COLLECTION

Past efforts and committees have focused on the 21 Highland Street property and Recreation Center. The following reports have been referenced by the Committee and will be available on the 21 Highland Street Future Use Committee town website for easy access to the public.

- Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS) report on South Union School
- REPORT OF SHOPC/CAPITAL PLANNING COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON 21 HIGHLAND ST. [AFFORDABLE HOUSING] – March 23, 2023
- Southborough Public Buildings Space Needs Study – January 20, 2022
- National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for South Union School

The Committee is also in the process of collecting the following pieces of data with additions possible:

- Prior architectural reports, if available
- Recreation Department current state usage and related details
- Other relevant reports, if available

V. Q1 / Q2 TIMELINE and PUBLIC FORUMS

As mentioned in Section II – DEPENDENCIES and ASSUMPTIONS, decisions about the future use of the 21 Highland Street property and Recreation Building are dependent on the outcome of the May Special Town Meeting vote and/or ballot question on the proposed Neary School project. The timeline defined by the Committee was built around this and the Annual Town Meeting (ATM).

- Prior to the April 7, 2025 ATM:
 - FAQ sheet for handout on tables at ATM and other locations in town
- Public tour/s of 21 Highland Street between the April and May Town Meetings; date TBD
- Public forum/s post the April 7 ATM; date TBD
- Submit Final Report to Select Board no later than June 30, 2025