



# RETHINKING RUNDLETT

## DAY 1 OF A MULTI-DAY SERIES

The future of Concord's middle school hangs in the balance as two ballot questions framed as referendums on the middle school's chosen location could challenge the decision to build at Broken Ground



GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor staff

Principal Jay Richard walks up a staircase inside Rundlett Middle School, which was built in 1957. He works with maintenance staff to keep the building usable. But for those inside Rundlett, a new school can't come soon enough.

By CATHERINE McLAUGHLIN  
Monitor staff

Concord's school board planned to build a new junior high school and city residents wanted answers about the location.

An architect slammed the proposed property as "too remote," questioning whether the parcel's size, larger than others considered, "justifies the need for about three-quarters of the children of Concord to travel to the further-most end of town." A location closer to downtown, he said, would be better.

The head of the school board published a sprawling explanation for the board's evaluation and selection of its desired property.

The appeal was the expansiveness of the new site, its outdoor learning opportunities, its proximity to a fast-growing city neighborhood, and, primarily, its cost-efficiency.

"I am glad to restate these reasons," it read. "It is important that every citizen have the facts about the site."

To anyone who lives in Concord, this might sound familiar — but that was almost 70 years ago.

In 1955, the school district desperately needed to build a new school: it had no junior high, and those students were scattered across the city in three different schools. A rising glut of young Baby Boomers threatened to burst elementary schools at the seams. The solution was a 1,200-student junior high, and the district wanted to buy a 20-acre property off South Street to house it.

Fast forward to 2024.

School leaders see the need for a new middle school as similarly dire — today's students are stuck in an outdated building that is deteriorating around them. On hot days in June and September, portions of the building without air conditioning can hit 100 degrees.

SEE HISTORY A6

## PAYING FOR THE PROJECT

# Ahead of vote, some costs remain hidden

Public has been asking for site expenses needed to build new school on raw land since July

By CATHERINE McLAUGHLIN  
Monitor staff

As any middle school math student knows, just writing the answer to a question isn't enough. Students must show their work.

Based on estimates from its architects, the school board set a \$152 million budget cap for the middle school project in July. HMFH, the architectural firm under a \$10 million contract to provide designs and initial es-

timates for the school district, asserts that the budget includes both money for site work and infrastructure upgrades at the forested raw land at Broken Ground.

For weeks, the Monitor asked the district and HMFH for a breakdown of the \$152 million project, outlining how much is expected to be spent on each portion of the new school. How much is set aside for infrastructure? How much is set aside for all the site work, like clearing the trees and building the parking lots and new roads?

They declined to provide even a

SEE COSTS A7



School officials and members of the public, look over maps during a tour of trails behind Broken Ground and Mill Brook schools where a new middle school is planned.

GEOFF FORESTER  
Monitor staff

## HIGHER EDUCATION

# UNH revisits protest arrests

New president reckons with the role of police on her campus

By JEREMY MARGOLIS  
Monitor staff

On the evening University of New Hampshire police arrested 12 people outside the building that would soon become her office, Elizabeth Chilton was 3,000 miles away, serving as the Chancellor of Washington State University's flagship campus.

Six days later, the University System of New Hampshire Board of Trustees named Chilton UNH's 21st president.

Since she began the job in Durham on July 1, no topic has occupied more of Chilton's time than the fallout from the pro-Palestine protest last May, she said at a community forum last month.

In certain ways, the events that unfolded at UNH on May 1 mirrored those that played out on the 72 other college campuses where protesters were arrested last spring. Tents

SEE UNH A5

## ACTIVE AGING

# For seniors, music helps build sound connections

By RACHEL WACHMAN  
Monitor staff

Dorean Kimball bought an accordion at a yard sale in 1972 thinking she would use it with her 5th and 6th grade students at Merrimack Valley Middle School, where she taught. The accordion sat untouched in a box for over three decades until she decided "If I'm ever going to play it, I'd better do something about it."

In 2005, she decided to start taking lessons at The Accordion Connection, a music store that used to exist in Gilmanton. Kimball, who had spent a year reluctantly learning to play the piano as a child, said she still remem-

SEE ACTIVE AGING A8

## INSIDE TODAY

32-page special section explores opportunities and issues around active aging in New Hampshire



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FOLLOW OUR COVERAGE

THE RETHINKING RUNDLETT SERIES

THE HISTORY

A divisive school decision in Concord, again, nearly 70 years after a 1955 vote. Plus, we examine the costs of the project of what the school district isn't saying.

ANOTHER CITY'S APPROACH

We look at how Concord's plan compares to other school projects in the state, including a recently build school in Nashua.

CRITICAL VOICES

Even though equity was cited as a reason to move the middle school, New Americans say they feel left out of the process.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Many teachers support the new site out of a sense of urgency to get into a new school as soon as possible because of Rundlett's poor learning conditions.

ON THE FIELDS

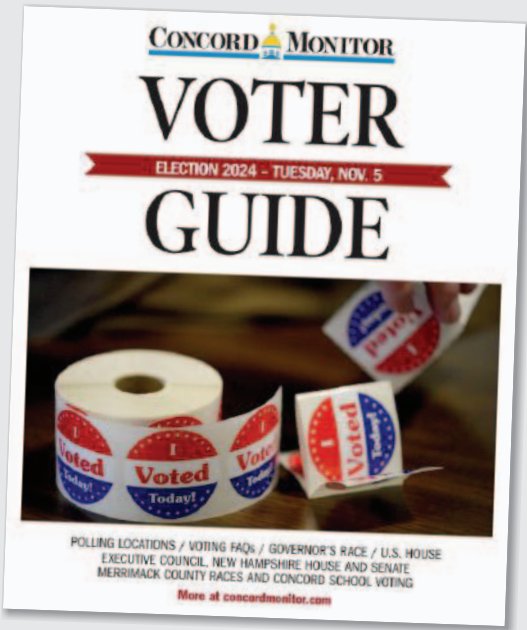
How will building a new middle school on the East Side of Concord affect Memorial Field plans?

THE ROAD TO SCHOOL

Estimating the number of future students can be tricky; busing them is more straightforward.

RESIDENT POLL

We conducted a citywide poll. Here's how 100 randomly-selected residents responded.



PREPARE TO VOTE

Make sure to pick up the Saturday, Nov. 2 Monitor, which will include a 2024 Election Voter Guide. You'll find quick-glance coverage of the major races in New Hampshire. You'll also be able to get the same information, plus lots of previous election coverage in our online voter guide at concordmonitor.com.

CANDIDATE FORUM AND DISCUSSION

LEARN MORE AT OUR EVENT ON OCT. 24

- The Concord Monitor will host a two-part event on Thursday at the Concord High School auditorium that will include a forum with the six candidates running for school board, followed by a moderated discussion about the “Rethinking Rundlett” series. The six candidates up for election for three school board seats include Board President Pam Walsh, fellow incumbent Barb Higgins and challengers Alex Winters, Sarah Sadowski, Joseph Scroggins and Clint Cogswell, who previously served on the board. The candidate forum will run from 6:30 to 8 p.m.
- The candidate forum will be followed by a community discussion of the Monitor's Rethinking Rundlett series.
- The event is Thursday, Oct. 24, 6:30 to 9 p.m. at Concord High's Christa McAuliffe Auditorium, 170 Warren St., Concord

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU: Have questions about the middle school plans? Email us at news@cmonitor.com with Rethinking Rundlett in the subject line

Future of Concord’s middle school hangs in the balance ahead of vote

HISTORY FROM A1

The origin story for what is now Rundlett Middle School echoes the current debate to replace it, with one fundamental difference: Different rules governed the school board in 1955. In order for that project to move forward, two-thirds of voters in March elections had to approve the bond to purchase the land and build the new school.

By a decisive margin, they did. Nearly 80% of city voters backed the junior high project, and students took their seats in 1957. It carried a \$1.4 million price tag — adjusted for inflation, that’s about \$16 million in today’s dollars. Times have changed.

Despite its modern-day autonomy, the Concord School Board is facing down a different, yet pivotal constituent vote.

Unlike its 1955 counterpart, members of the school board last year didn’t have to convince voters to back their choice when they chose a location for the new school. It may prove to be the project’s fatal flaw.

In the eleven months since the school board voted to move the middle school to raw land in East Concord, the planning process has chugged forward: the board appointed committees of construction experts, teachers and parents, refined the building features it wanted to include and set a budget for construction costs.

While Concord is almost a year closer to a new school, a group of citizens has successfully put two referendums on the ballot that could upend the location vote and delay the project. Board President Pamela Walsh, one of the new location’s most ardent backers, is up for re-election, facing a string of challengers pledging to reopen the middle school debate.

The two endeavors — that of the school district to deliver a new middle school at Broken Ground and that of citizens to force a rebuild at the current site — are now on an election-day collision course.

The city remains divided. In the neighborhood closest to where the new middle school will go, “Rebuild at Rundlett” signs flourish on front lawns. The same is true in the South End, on streets near where the current school has stood since ‘57.

In recent weeks, a new set of signs have sprouted. Color-blocked green and blue, they urge residents to “Keep Concord Schools Strong” by voting “no” on the charter amendments.

For all the benefits of the Broken Ground site the school board has pointed to, many residents hold up one essential argument in the location debate: many constituents — especially in the neighborhoods most affected by this decision — want the school to stay where it is.

Liz Tardugno lives at the end of North Curtisville Road, near the cul-de-sac that holds the trailhead for the city’s Batchelder Mill Road trail network. She remains unswayed.

“I will be brief,” she said to the Concord School Board at a June project meeting, holding the microphone with one hand and her toddler on her hip with the other. “Because we’re not going to last.”

“I have friends downtown who bought property in the hopes that their children could walk to school, which now can’t,” she said. “And I now will have a school in my backyard which I don’t want.”

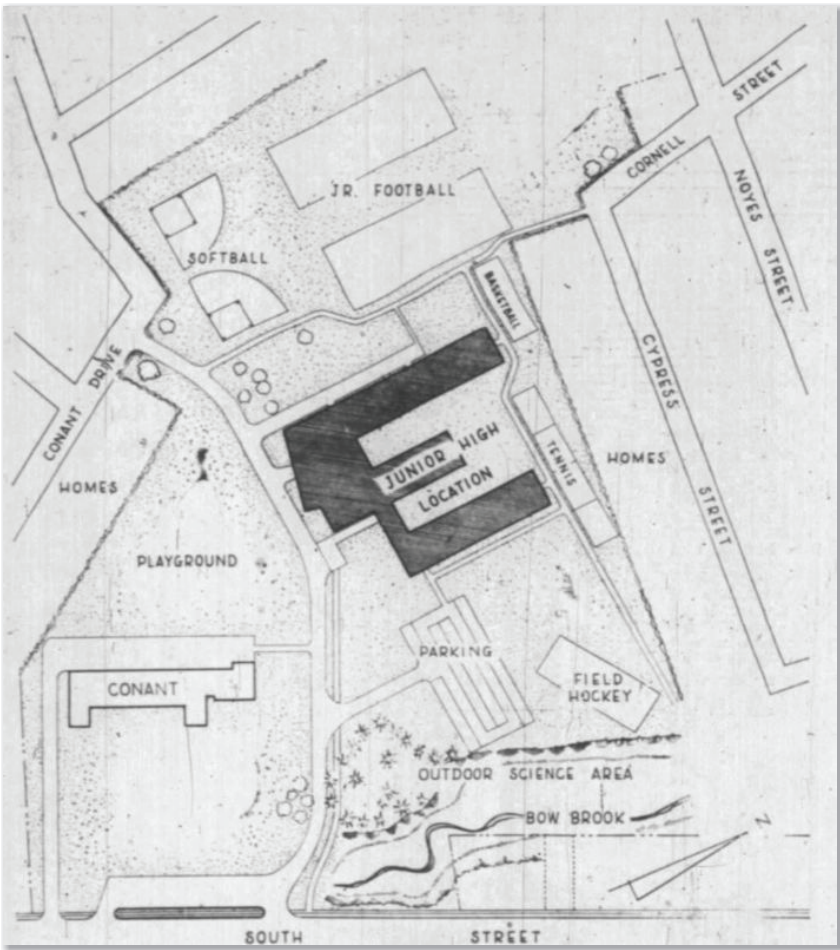
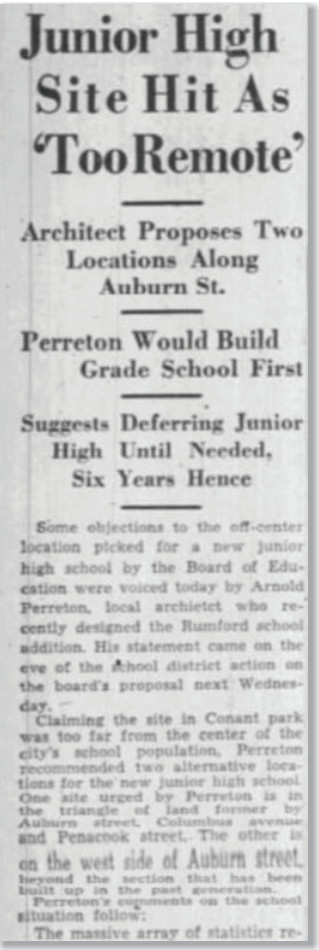
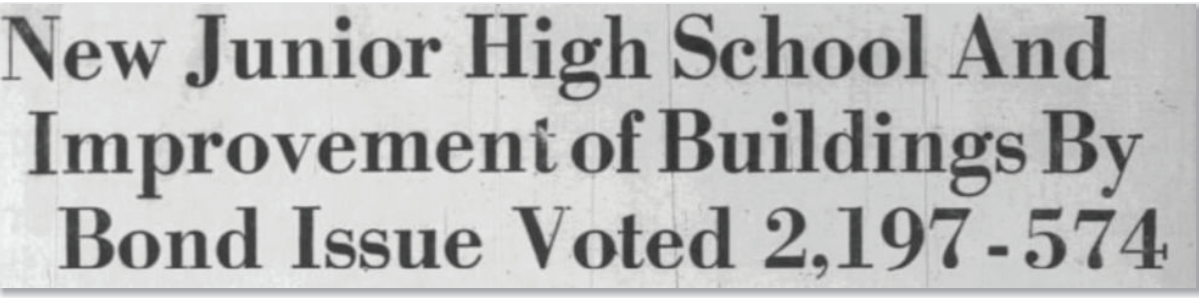
In the face of persistent pushback, current board members have spent



Principal Jay Richard points out the welcoming plaque inside Rundlett Middle School. The school was built in 1957, but there have been additions to the school throughout the years.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The following headlines and building plans appeared on front pages of the Concord Monitor in March 1955.



the last year explaining, re-explaining and then explaining again why they chose Broken Ground. They have refined the design of the building itself while tripling the amount of land to be cleared from eight acres to 24 while insisting it will be more expensive to rebuild at Rundlett. The board has only grown more resolved in their choice — several members who had been pro-Rundlett said this summer that they’d changed their minds. Won over by their fellow board members, they feel that moving to Broken Ground is, “right for the taxpayers and for our kids.” They hoped those still partial to the current location would come around, but broad buy-in hasn’t materialized.

Some of the board’s justifications for a location change hold up to scrutiny. There isn’t room on South Street for features that students and residents have asked for; building a new school next to the current school would mean students and staff lose a lot of basic facilities for years on end. The outdoor learning opportunities at Broken Ground are more expansive.

Other arguments lack supporting information: the district was unable to provide any cost outlines for the project, including estimates for site work and infrastructure associated with a Broken Ground project, and leaders in the New American community said they felt left out of the decision-making process about the Broken Ground location before the school board claimed to advocate on their behalf.

Before voters go to the ballot box, Monitor reporting will analyze arguments on both sides of the location debate, seeking to answer the questions: Did the school board make the right decision to move the school to Broken Ground? And, if not, is going back on that decision the right path forward?

If the middle school project proceeds as planned, a ribbon-cutting at the new school would come in the summer of 2028.

For many inside Rundlett, that day can’t come fast enough.

Every time roof leaks leave brown stains on ceiling tiles, Principal Jay Richard is adamant that they be replaced. Three hundred new tiles have gone in since the end of the last school year.

“The stains, you know, it’s a pain for my custodian. But it really bothers me because I want it to look good for my kids,” Richard said. “These kids need to know that we care.”

Other signs of the school’s age are evident everywhere. On one side of the stairs, 65 years of foot traffic have worn divots down to the concrete.

In an eighth-grade art classroom, Stephanie Bednaz hangs a small tapestry over a hole in the wall — an old outlet that was removed but never refinished.

“I’ve worked here for 30 years, and I love Rundlett. But it’s a band-aid on a band-aid on a band-aid at this point,” She said. “It’s a hot disaster.”

Over the next week, a series of stories will examine the arguments in favor and against each location, answer frequently asked questions about the project and what it means for the city, and introduce findings from a district-wide survey conducted by reporters about both the project and the charter amendments. In tandem with this coverage, the Monitor is also hosting a forum on the evening of Oct. 2024 where, in addition to questions posed to candidates, a panel of Monitor reporters will discuss their work.





**2023** This design included the removal of 8 acres of trees to make room for a new middle school. Revamped fields would have been placed between Broken Ground and the new school.



**2024** An updated design now includes the removal of more than 24 acres of trees to make room for a new middle school and a brand new set of fields farther away from Broken Ground.

# Ahead of vote, some costs remain unclear

## COSTS FROM A1

range for those expenses even after repeated requests.

“I don’t have the estimate with me, I’m sorry,” an HMFH representative, laptop on the table, told the Monitor in an interview. “We can get back to you with a percentage.” In the week following that interview, that information was not provided.

The district has laid out only the broad costs of the project.

Of the \$152 million budget, roughly \$122 million is for construction, with another \$29.6 million set aside for “soft” expenses like design and planning. It’s the most expensive school project to apply for state building aid since the Department of Education started keeping digitized records 20 years ago, even when adjusted for inflation, according to a Concord Monitor analysis.

Ample renderings, presentations and estimates are available on the website about the Middle School Project. In email exchanges, meetings, conversations, interviews and opinion pieces, board members have been earnest about why they believe Broken Ground is truly the better location.

Yet when it comes to a central assertion behind moving the school to Broken Ground — that it remains cheaper than rebuilding at Rundlett — the district and its contractors have refused to show their work.

The district has laid out additional costs for the South Street site, including millions more for demolition and an extended, five-year construction window, meaning students wouldn’t access the new school until 2030 instead of 2028.

The district did provide the Monitor with a site cost comparison between the two properties. But it is based on information from November 2023, when the design at Broken Ground was projected to be built on eight acres of land, with playing fields shared with the elementary schools there. The overall footprint has since ballooned to three times that size: between 22.5 and 24.5 acres are expected to be cleared of trees, with playing fields extending out behind the school.

Cost is not the only benefit the Broken Ground site is purported to offer. But without an up-to-date breakdown, the Monitor was unable to confirm whether that promise of savings remains true.

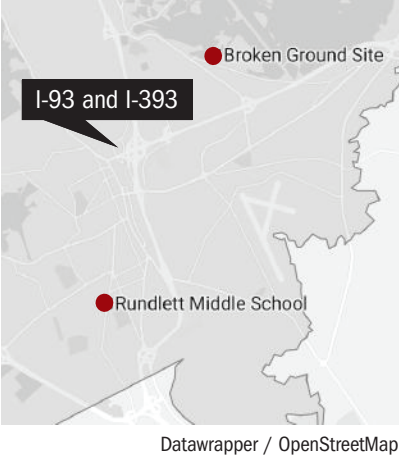
### Your tax bill: What will this cost?

If the board uses \$16 million it has saved up for major projects and receives \$30 million in state building aid — the best-case scenario for this project without major legislative action — the project would add \$0.59 onto the district tax rate in the first year, according to the district.

That adds \$207 to the tax bill of a \$350,000 home during the first year of the bond before any increases tied to the annual school budget. If the project gets no building aid but still applies its trust fund, that number rises to \$378 on the same home in the first year.

The overall cost — initially \$176 million before it was scaled back — has been at the heart of conversations about a new middle school throughout the life of the project, from the reason to build new rather than renovate Rundlett and the decision not to add a fifth grade to the school.

Both before and since the Broken Ground site was selected last December, the school board and project architects have said the new location will be cheaper than if they opted to



build in the South End, partially because of the money needed to demolish Rundlett.

“Right off the bat, that’s \$5 million we could turn into making this Net Zero,” board member Jim Richards said in June. “It’s \$5 million that we could turn into usable classrooms, facilities and things for our kids.”

That assertion was based on the November 2023 cost comparison, which was presented to the school board days before it voted to choose a new location.

Overall, that report found that the price for site costs, like demolition, at Rundlett was \$5.2 million more than what it would cost for things like infrastructure and site work at the raw land near Broken Ground.

Driving the expense on South Street was the need to phase construction since students would still need to access the site during construction. The new school would have to be complete before the old Rundlett could be knocked down, and only after that could fields and other outdoor work be completed.

Because of that phasing, rebuilding at Rundlett — from shovels in the ground to all facilities being usable — would take five years, according to Keith Kelley, director of pre-construction and planning at Harvey Construction, hired by the district to plan the school. Broken Ground, by comparison, is scheduled to be completed in under three years.

“There’s absolutely a premium, both in time and money, to build on an existing site that has students, faculty, staff, sporting events, whatever else going on all around us,” Kelley said.

That extended work period carried a price tag of \$3.1 million, as of last fall. Kelley said it would be higher now. It also would mean students would go without outdoor spaces for sports and recess for several years.

The estimated cost to clear trees at Broken Ground was about \$1.1 million in 2023, but that figure was based on a smaller project. The school board has since decided to build three new athletic fields behind the new school and added more parking lots and roads, which calls for clearing two dozen acres of trees, not eight. The estimate for roads and parking was slightly higher at the new location, but that is similarly inaccurate because it came before the design for the area ballooned.

When it comes to infrastructure, architects estimated last year that road, water, sewer, power and other infrastructure needs at Broken Ground would be about \$1.4 million more than what was needed on South Street. That number included \$150,000 to relocate walking trails and \$500,000 for traffic improvements, like making all sidewalks ADA compliant, putting in flashing stop signs and adding lines to South Curtisville Road.

These costs are included some-

where in the budget, but what they are under the new scope of the project is unknown.

### Price check to rescind the vote

Time is money, as they say. Reversing the planning process now would cause delays that will result in additional costs.

The school designed for Broken Ground cannot be transposed directly onto the South Street site, according to HMFH.

“You wouldn’t start from square one,” architect Tina Stanislaski said, “but the plan that we’ve developed won’t work in that location...we’d have to reconfigure everything.”

That reconfiguration would add \$2.85 million in new design work, according to the district website.

In addition, any delays to the start of the project incurred while a charter amendment fight plays out, either on the board or in court — would also drive up costs. If construction expenses rise 3% each year, the low end of current trends, costs could rise by \$3.6 million each year the school is delayed.

The district calculates about \$10 million in new costs if the project backtracks now, on top of the cost of demolition and phased construction.

That is a hefty total. But it is incomplete: Importantly, it does not account for how much residents could stand to avoid in site work costs by not building at Broken Ground, leaving the actual price tag for reversing the vote unclear.

### Classrooms and construction zones: The student learning side-effects

Beyond the cloudiness of the costs, the district has cited clear benefits to building at Broken Ground.

Kids now entering middle school were in first grade when the pandemic hit. The board doesn’t want to add more interruptions to their learning by making them go to school just a few yards from a construction zone.

“There’s been a lot of talk about, ‘it’s not a big deal,’ the kids will get through it,” Middle School Principal Jay Richard said. “But if I had an opportunity to choose for my students, whether they had to have the construction experience on their current site or not have that experience, guess which one I’m going to pick?”

Both potential construction sites, it is worth noting, are adjacent to current schools.

Broken Ground and Mill Brook, as a unit, educate more than a third of Concord’s elementary students, including most students of that age who are learning English as a second language. The two schools are cornered by two roads — Portsmouth Street and South Curtisville Road — that would both be the main arteries for vehicles to access the new buildings’ construction site. The two dozen acres of trees that will be removed to make way for the new school include sections directly abutting the two elementary schools’ fields and playgrounds.

Rundlett is a citywide school, and disruptions would impact a broader swath of learners. Superintendent Kathleen Murphy told the Monitor that students would not be displaced from Rundlett during a build process on South Street simply because “there’s no other place to put them.” They would be far closer to an active construction zone than Broken Ground students. The same goes for elementary students at Abbott-Downing.

Both construction zones would put students’ learning environments at risk. But the period of disruption on South Street is more acute, impacts more students and takes place over a longer period of time.

### Room to expand?

One main draw of the Broken Ground site for board members was the size of the property. The district owns 59 acres, and its development extends into 29 of them. The property size gives “room to grow,” the board has said, that other district schools don’t have.

Perhaps more notably, however, the design includes some features that may not be possible on the 20-acre property off South Street.

For example, Rundlett Middle School recently installed an outdoor basketball hoop that includes four square lines painted on the blacktop. Still, it’s one of the only play areas available.

When students were asked what a new school ought to have, outdoor basketball courts was one of their top asks, architect Holly Miller said. The Broken Ground site, to execute that ask, has two of them. To fit athletic fields and a new school at Rundlett, she said, “There’s no room for a basketball court.”

When the school board sought feedback on which energy systems to include in the new design, residents were largely united in support of an investment in in-ground heat pumps. It was one of few things everyone testifying seemed to agree on — geothermal heat, carrying the greatest opportunities for rebates and being the most energy efficient, would be worth the initial investment.

Heat pumps are likely possible on South Street, Miller and Stanislaski said, but space limitations on the wells would likely require that they be supplemented by boiler heat — a hybrid system that demands more maintenance.

Looking toward the future, some residents have wondered why, if district enrollments are continuing to decline, the 900-student middle school would need “room to grow.”

“Down the road, maybe we’ll need to put some preschools into our elementary — that moves that fifth grade out, and it could become a five through eight” middle school, Murphy said. “The building is set up so that we could do that. We couldn’t do that at Rundlett.”

Of all the board’s reasons to move the school to East Concord — from the benefits of a larger property to the educational and financial detriment of building alongside a school that remains in use — many of them are well supported.

It’s possible that cost falls in that camp: sizable added expenses to building on South Street are evident. Without knowing the current site development and infrastructure earmarks, residents have been left to trust that the math that the expenses at South Street still surpass those unique to Broken Ground, even as the design changes.

With a Nov. 5 vote on two charter amendments targeting the board’s decision to relocate the middle school, many residents, like Debra Samaha, can’t accept that.

“You still have not provided major infrastructure costs. You say they’re built into the budget: we can’t see them, we have asked repeatedly what they are, point blank. We cannot get answers from you,” Samaha said to the board when it set the budget cap in July. “As taxpayers, we need to know the true cost.”

## FAQs

**Q: When did the school board first start working on the middle school? When did they choose the new location at Broken Ground?**

A: The board officially started studies for a new school in 2016. In 2019, they voted to rebuild rather than renovate the existing school. They chose the Broken Ground location in December, 2023 over keeping the school on South Street.

**Q: How much will it cost?**

A: The budget cap for the project is \$152 million. In a best-case scenario, where the district applies its capital reserve savings and gets the highest amount of building aid available to them, that would be an increase of \$207 in the first year on the tax bill of a \$350,000 home.

**Q: How much will the project cost, including interest payments on the bond?**

A: Assuming a 4.5% interest rate and possible refinancing in the future, interest would add another \$102.8 million, bringing the total payback for taxpayers to about \$255 million, more than a quarter billion dollars.

**Q: Is it true that the Rundlett site is more expensive to build on?**

A: Without a full breakdown of current costs for the Broken Ground site, it’s difficult to show that one site is more or less expensive than the other. A cost estimate from 2023 showed that Rundlett had higher site work costs, but the Broken Ground development plan has drastically changed since that comparison was completed.

**Q: How big is the new school? How big is Rundlett?**

A: The new school is 203,000 square feet. Rundlett is 156,119 square feet. Part of what makes up the difference includes the addition of a 450-seat auditorium, larger music and art spaces, and larger classrooms — many in Rundlett are below the state minimum size.

**Q: How many acres of trees and forest will be cut down for the new school at Broken Ground?**

A: Originally, when the board chose the location last year, that number was 8 acres. Since, it has ballooned: the school moved further out into the property, and sports fields were moved behind the school. Now, the total is approximately 24 acres. For scale, that’s equivalent to roughly 20 football fields.

**Q: What is the cost of the site work and infrastructure improvements at the new site?**

A: The exact costs is unknown. While that work is included in the \$152 million budget, Concord school district officials and HMFH Architects would not provide an estimate for site work that was updated for the current design and development footprint.

**Q: Is this decision to build a school on the East Side of Concord irreversible?**

A: No, but a reversal would delay the start of construction by about two years, according to the district. It also would introduce new costs, including increased design costs, a longer duration of construction work, and the demolition of the old building to make room for new athletic fields.

More FAQs on Monday





RETHINKING RUNDLETT

School would set new high cost mark

Difference between Concord and new Nashua school costs come from design and inflation

By SRUTHI GOPALAKRISHNAN  
Monitor staff

The atmosphere inside Nashua's new middle school differs dramatically from the school it replaced, a dark and gloomy 85-year-old building about five miles away.

Natural light pours through the expansive glass windows. Almost all the classrooms are equipped with 70-inch screens. The flooring is durable, rubberized tiles to prevent serious injuries from falls, while the halls are lined with

energy-efficient LED lighting.

Outside, students have access to an impressive array of sports facilities, including a quarter-mile track, baseball and soccer fields, tennis courts and basketball courts.

Other modern safety features include bulletproof glass and an advanced gunshot detection system that identifies both the location and caliber of any firearm that goes off in the building.

The refresh is contagious, according to Doug Duffina, the supervisor for plant operations at the Nashua School District.

"We came to bright and light," he

SEE SCHOOL A5



GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor staff

If Nashua were to build its middle school today, the cost would rise to around \$115 million compared to Concord's \$152 million project.

I-93 AND I-89 EXPANSION

Road plans rise to \$370M

If all goes according to plan, work on major repairs to bridges would start in 2029

By DAVID BROOKS  
Monitor staff

The projected price tag for the long-discussed expansion of I-93 and I-89 in Concord and Bow has risen to \$370 million, almost 50% more than projections made before the pandemic, with the purchase of rights-of-way now slated for 2026 and first major construction for 2029.

The state Department of Transportation will hold a public information session on what its calling the Bow-Concord Project, including time for questions, on Thursday, Oct. 24, in the Concord Community Center, 14 Canterbury Road, starting at 6 p.m.

The project, which has been in planning stages for well over a decade, would add a lane to I-93 in both directions over a five-mile stretch in Concord, making major changes to Exits 12 through 15 and some adjoining streets, as well as at Exit 1 on I-89 in Bow.

As detailed by an interactive website at [www.bow-concord.com](http://www.bow-concord.com), the project would involve some non-car-related work such as moving railroad tracks, expanding the Merrimack River Greenway Trail and adding some bicycle and pedestrian

SEE WIDENING A3

ABOUT THE SERIES

Each week, the 'Concord Monitor' will recognize one of our region's many Hometown Heroes. Follow along at [concordmonitor.com](http://concordmonitor.com) and learn how you can nominate a Hometown Hero.



Community connectors

Our town criers volunteer to write a column weekly

By ARIANNA MacNEILL  
Monitor staff

Nearly 30 years ago, Cheryl Stinson decided to respond to an ad in the Concord Monitor looking for a Penacook town crier.

A volunteer position, each town crier writes a short weekly column detailing community happenings, dubbed Talk of the Towns nowadays. Stinson had passed it by once since she was a new mom. But in 1995 with her daughter a year old, the timing felt right.

"I never envisioned that 29 years later I'd still be doing it," Stinson said.

Though not a staffer, Stinson, and her fellow town criers, since the creation of the volunteer positions in the early 1990s, have weathered changes to the paper, adjustments to the way their columns are presented, and seen the newspaper industry make the transition from print only to having both a print edition and a news website.

To honor their efforts, they are being recognized at Volunteer NH's 2024 Spirit of NH Awards Ceremony on Monday night.

Stinson's first column was published on April 16, 1995, in the fairly new Sunday Monitor during a time before the widespread use of email, and long before town websites and social media made community information more easily accessible. Content, often on physical pieces of paper, passed through many hands each day before the broadsheets whirled through the press at a dizzying speed.

"We had our names and our headline phone numbers at the end with our picture," she said, noting that all the town criers had their photograph taken by one of the newspaper's photographers.

"People were calling us with their news or mailing us," she said. Once she was finished writing up her column, Stinson then drove to the Monitor building off Sewalls Falls Road, which was still fairly new, and handed over a hard copy.

But even with a switch to email, com-

SEE HOMETOWN HEROES A6



GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor staff

Jean Ver Hoeven, the Concord Town Crier, works in her South End home. The Town Criers are receiving a group service award at Monday's Volunteer NH's Spirit of NH Awards Ceremony.

OUR 2024 COMMUNITY PARTNER

While the challenges continue, so do the good works done by our neighbors, our teachers, our health care providers, our volunteers and so many others. This is their story. Ledyard National Bank is proud to support the 2024 Hometown Heroes, who were nominated by members of the community and selected by editors of the Monitor. Nominate your Hometown Hero today at [concordmonitor.com](http://concordmonitor.com).



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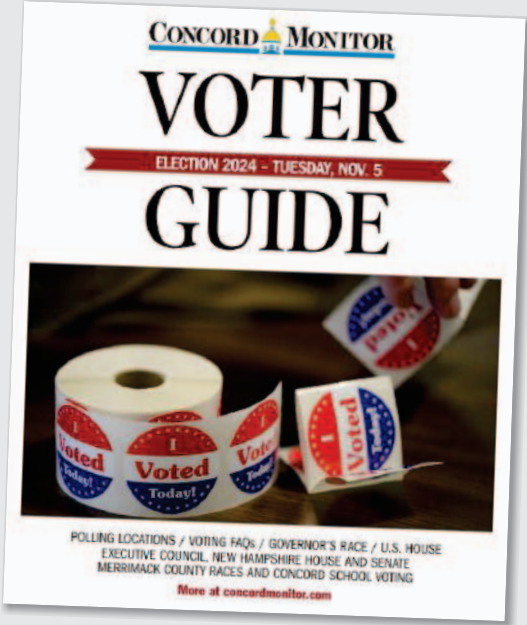
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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU: Have questions about the middle school plans? Email us at news@cmonitor.com with Rethinking Rundlett in the subject line

Proposed middle school would set new high cost mark

SCHOOL FROM A1

said. “There’s a different attitude; the kids are way different. We’re seeing a big difference.”

That’s the transformation Concord has working toward for the better part of a decade.

When Nashua asked for state building aid in 2020 to fund its middle school project — which included both \$30 million in renovations to two other schools and the \$92 million construction of McCarthy Middle School — it was the most expensive project to ever apply for the program.

That changed two years later when Concord sought aid for its new middle school — currently with a price tag of \$152 million for a single building. Concord’s ambitious plan to build a new middle school on South Curtisville Road set a new high-water mark for any school building project seeking state aid during the past two decades, even adjusted for inflation, a Monitor analysis found. State record-keeping made a deeper historical analysis impractical.

Named after the late alderman Brian S. McCarthy, Nashua’s new school has comparable square footage, serves roughly the same number of students and was built on raw land about the same distance away from the old school as Concord’s plan. As a result, it’s been a frequent point of reference for residents with questions about the Rundlett project.

Pamela Walsh, president of the Concord School Board, said that comparing the building costs between Nashua and Concord isn’t fair for several reasons, particularly the timing of each project.

With construction starting in 2026, Walsh noted that Concord will face “five or six years of construction inflation” costs compared to Nashua.

“When you’re looking at our construction estimates, those are estimates for starting construction more than a year from now,” Walsh said. “Nashua started and locked in a lot of its prices pre-COVID.”

It is estimated that construction costs have increased by 3-5% per year based on industry standards. If Nashua were to build its middle school today, the cost would rise to around \$120 million, based on those assumptions. Even on the high end, Concord’s middle school is still about \$25 million more expensive than the one that just opened this fall 35 miles to the south.

Anxious about the price tag to replace Rundlett Middle School, residents have wondered why Concord’s school is so expensive by comparison.

The difference comes down to features, according to Keith Kelley, director of planning in construction at Harvey Construction, which was hired to build Nashua’s school and is working with Concord on its plans. Nashua’s design is centered around its classrooms, while Concord’s design prioritizes features like larger physical and artistic education



Doug Duffina, the supervisor for plant operations at the Nashua School District, shows off the new Brian S. McCarthy Middle School. The school opened to students this fall and cost \$92 million compared to \$152 for Concord’s comparable project.

spaces. Those features, which are what students, teachers and residents alike have told the district they wanted, simply cost more.

“Those are huge costs specific to building an auditorium,” Kelley said. “They are obviously more of a premium than classroom costs.”

What Nashua built, what Concord wants

The 212,000-square-foot McCarthy Middle School, located miles outside of downtown on DiAntonio Drive, was designed to maximize teaching spaces, Duffina said.

Unlike the old school on Elm Street, which featured a 1,500-seat auditorium, Nashua opted for a cafeteria — a flexible space that combines a cafeteria and auditorium. The gymnasium, seating 400, provides ample space for gatherings and events when needed.

McCarthy features 60 classrooms for an anticipated enrollment of 800 students. Concord’s 203,000-square-foot design, by contrast, will contain 45 classrooms for an enrollment of up to 900 students.

The Concord School Board approved a schematic design this summer.

Originally proposed with a 900-seat auditorium, plans were downshifted to feature a versatile 450-seat multi-purpose theater with flexible seating and adjustable flooring, inspired by the Bank of New Hampshire Stage in downtown Concord. The school also includes a spacious 9,000-square-foot gymnasium, a 5,000-square-foot multipurpose athletic space and separate rooms for band, choir, orchestra, music theory and robotics.

The design doesn’t ignore

classrooms: its layout was drawn to fit Concord’s middle school’s “pod” structure, which groups students into smaller clusters. The classrooms, which aren’t drastically larger than state minimum standards, will still be far larger than those currently in use at Rundlett.

Unlike Nashua, which decided to build its school without state aid, Concord must comply with stricter energy efficiency and building code requirements due to its reliance on state funds, which also adds to the overall project cost. In addition, the building features a geothermal heat system and rooftop solar panels, a move many residents endorse.

Paying for it

When school districts apply for state building aid, they are assigned a spot in line for funding based on, essentially, how bad the current facilities are.

Nashua chose not to receive aid because it was assigned a fifth-place spot in line. It would have had to wait years for money to come through. What it lost in potential state aid was offset from savings by avoiding the inflated construction costs that Concord is facing.

Concord currently sits second in line for aid and is anticipating a grant as early as next fall. The project stands out among recent building aid applications because of its price tag.

A review by the Monitor reveals that no other school project in New Hampshire has come close to this level of investment since 1996, even when adjusted for inflation.

A rough inflation calculation using estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics reveals that schools constructed throughout the state in the last

two decades will fall significantly short of the price tag Concord is proposing, even if they were built in 2026 — the same year Concord plans to break ground on its middle school.

For example, Manchester’s application for building aid for the Henry J. McLaughlin Jr. Middle School in 1996 was \$9.5 million — an amount that would swell to around \$20 million by 2026.

The closest to Concord in terms of total cost were Bedford High School built in 2005 for \$53 million, which would be about \$93 million adjusted for inflation, and Exeter High School, which started construction in 2003 for \$50 million. The price tag would be roughly \$91 million if built in 2026.

These financial disparities are particularly poignant when considering the median household incomes — Concord stands at \$77,874, which is similar to Exeter, while Bedford has a considerably higher median of \$151,850, according to recent state data.

At most, the district would see a \$29 million offer in 2025, or around \$31 million if it waited until the following year, under the current rules. However, tax estimates for residents have been based on the project’s receiving \$40 million.

The final aid amount Concord qualifies for will be determined when it reaches the front of the line.

An estimate for the project hasn’t been done since the district applied in 2022, and the application was based on building a new school on Clinton Street, a long-dead proposal.

According to the New Hampshire Department of Education, the maximum allow-

able cost per square foot for calculating school building aid in Merrimack County is \$265.

However, Concord’s proposal significantly exceeds this limit, coming in near \$600 per square foot, more than double the allowable threshold. That calculation reduces the amount of money the project would be eligible to receive.

The state acknowledges school construction could cost more than its cap, but those won’t be reimbursed.

“School districts, designers, and construction firms should understand these costs to be the upper limit for the payment of school building aid,” the state guidelines advise. “They are not intended to be an accurate estimate for the actual cost of construction for a particular design in current or future market conditions.”

The price tag for Concord’s school means school board members are relying on building aid to buoy the cost of the project, and leaders have warned that waiting any longer to build its middle school will continue to drive up costs — and put its ability to get aid at risk.

Concord would only lose its spot in line for aid if it turns down an offer that matches or exceeds the request in its application.

While Concord has been chipping away at the total cost of the project, which was first estimated at \$176 million, Nashua completed its multi-school project this year under budget.

“It was a group effort, a lot of people involved,” Duffina said. “I believe there are a few bucks left over for any last-minute things,”

Sruthi Gopalakrishnan can be reached at sgopalakrishnan@cmonitor.com

FAQs

**Q: If the school board chose to reverse course and rebuild at Rundlett, could the school building they designed for Broken Ground go there?**

**A:** No. The architects would use the same input and goals, but the floor plan would have to be redone to fit on the property beside the existing school.

**Q: Do they have to build a new school? Couldn’t part of the existing school be renovated to reduce costs?**

**A:** in 2017, the district was told that renovating the current building would cost approximately the same amount as building a new school. To get more features for roughly the same costs, they voted in 2019 to build anew.

**Q: What will happen to Rundlett if the move to Broken Ground happens?**

**A:** Nobody knows. Several district leaders have floated the idea of making it the new home of the Concord Regional Technical Center, which is outgrowing its space at Concord High. Nothing has been decided yet. If the district opts to sell the building, the City of Concord has the right of first refusal.

**Q: How does the size of the Nashua and Concord middle schools compare?**

**A:** Concord’s middle school is estimated to be 203,000 square feet, while Nashua’s is slightly larger at 212,000 square feet.

**Q: How does the cost of the two schools compare?**

**A:** Nashua built its new middle school for \$92 million and spent a total of \$130 million to construct the middle school and renovate two others. Concord’s middle school project is estimated to cost \$152 million.

**Q: What are some other similarities between the two schools?**

**A:** Nashua has built its middle school on undeveloped land. Concord has also chosen raw land to build its middle school. Both schools are designed to accommodate similar projected enrollments, with Nashua planned for 800 students and Concord projected at 900.

**Q: How does the new Concord school compare to other NH school construction projects?**

**A:** In the last 20 years, state building aid applications indicate that no other school project in New Hampshire has approached the cost and scale of Concord’s proposed middle school.

BREAKING NEWS

Check for updates throughout the day at concordmonitor.com.



**RETHINKING RUNDLETT:** Supporters say relocating middle school balances resources, but New American families say they feel excluded from the decision-making process

# DISCUSSING EQUITY



Concord High student Aryn Bernardo (left) talks with fellow students Alex Otterson, Riley Goodwin, Eliza Norris, and Caitlyn Borkush in front of the Works on Main Street on Friday.

GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor staff

By **MICHAELA TOWFIGHI**  
Monitor staff

Aryn Bernardo watches Filipino telenovelas to feel connected to the country her parents left just before she was born. She can understand Tagalog in the shows and when her parents speak it to her at home, but she doesn't know how to speak the language. As a junior at Concord High School, she wants students from immigrant families, like herself, to feel more included. She's working toward that goal as the president of the school's racial equity club

and through the district's equity advisory committee by engaging in conversation about inclusion and belonging in the district. In her conversations with school employees, one topic has never been broached – the building of a new middle school in Concord adjacent to Mill Brook and Broken Ground elementary schools, where she was once a student. Personally, she thinks Rundlett should remain where it is. But she knows many friends and neighbors who are struggling to form an opinion. They feel left out of the discussion to move the school despite equity being cited as a justification for doing so.

"My parents, they don't really know. My friend's parents also don't know. We know that they're planning to move to school, but we don't really get that much reason, like, why necessarily," said Bernardo. "It's all in English. I have some friends and their families, their first language is not English. So it's going to be hard for them to understand what's going on with these big, major changes and there's no other way of communication for them to know what's happening within their schools."

SEE **RETHINKING RUNDLETT** A6

*"People continue to argue, 'oh this is better, this is better,' but honestly there's no marginalized community voices. They're not included in the conversation. ... That makes me afraid of moving the middle school without having conversations with families over there and making sure that this is a positive decision for everybody."*

**FISTO NDAYISHIMIYE**, Concord High School graduate of 2019

## CONCORD

# District special ed costs spiking

Influx of more than 200 students with special needs requires more staff to be hired

By **JEREMY MARGOLIS**  
Monitor staff

Over 200 students with disabilities have enrolled in the Concord School District since last summer, an influx that has far exceeded the district's projections and strained its support services. The unexpected increase will cost the district about \$600,000 more than anticipated in special education expenses this year, district administrators told school board members last week. Last spring, the board had allocated \$28 million, or about a quarter of the district's \$107.9 million budget, to student services for this school year. The increased cost – which will primarily be spent on hiring more support staff – is not expected to materially affect taxpayer's rates this year. Rather, it will primarily be covered by deferring the planned full payment on district transportation and HVAC bonds, Business Administrator Jack Dunn said. The number of Concord students with individualized education programs, or IEPs, has increased by a total of 124 since last summer, according to data from the district. Two

SEE **SPECIAL ED** A2

## CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT 2

# Candidates talk foreign policy

By **CHARLOTTE MATHERLY**  
Monitor staff

Lily Tang Williams condemned Vladimir Putin's siege against Ukraine – but, she says the U.S. has given enough aid. "We thought, 'Hey, with our help, maybe the war will end pretty fast,'" said Williams, the Republican nominee for New Hampshire's second congressional district. "No. This is the third year, and I'm still not convinced."

With the U.S.'s sizable national debt, she said the country should focus on negotiating peace instead of writing "blank checks." Congress has often discussed the conditions that should be in place for Ukrainian aid. The U.S. also created a federal

SEE **FORUM** A5

# Weather service seeks snow observer



**DAVID BROOKS**  
Granite Geek

If you're one of those people who loves to brag or complain about how much snow you get – and since this is New Hampshire, of course you are – now's your chance to one-up everybody else. With one caveat: You have to live close to Concord Municipal Airport and not on a big hill. The National Weather Service is looking for a new official snow observer, whose tallies will be part of the official weather record. DeAnne Fortier, who has been doing the job since 2004, is moving on. Fortier says she won't miss the hours but she did enjoy being the font of knowledge for friends.

SEE **GRANITE GEEK** A5



Monitor file

Being an official snow observer means you must be willing to collect measurements during some less-than-ideal times.



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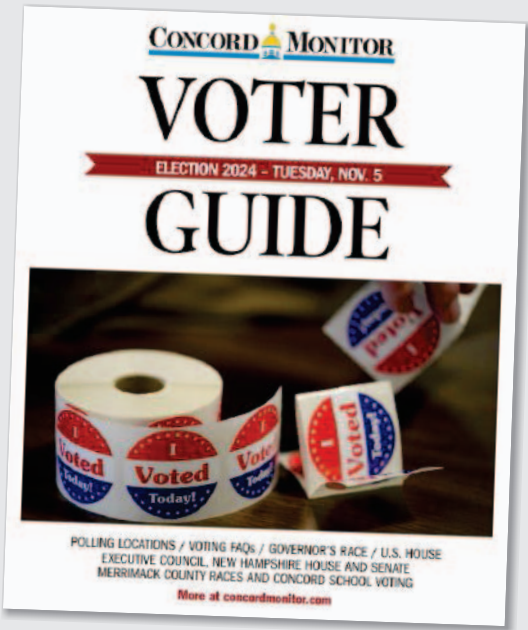
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WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU: Have questions about the middle school plans? Email us at news@cmonitor.com with Rethinking Rundlett in the subject line

New American families say they feel excluded

RETINKING RUNDLETT FROM A1

'They're not included'

Clement Kigugu, the director of Overcomers Refugee Services, is certain Concord's middle school should remain where it is.

In the South End, the middle school, high school and Memorial Field provide a vital hub for families near Concord's downtown.

“It connects the kids who live at the Heights to the other side, downtown and other kids from around. All the activities, YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs are downtown. Memorial Field, the high school,” he said. “There's so many activities there.”

Since 2011, Concord has welcomed over 1,500 refugees – a third of all those who were resettled in New Hampshire – according to data from the state refugee program. As a result, Concord's overall diversity is growing, but that growth is clustered in certain parts of the city. Census data shows that in 2020, the Heights was one of the most racially diverse neighborhoods in the state, with only 66 percent of residents identifying as “just white.”

Mill Brook and Broken Ground elementary schools are the two most diverse elementary schools in the city, with 15 and 18 percent of students identified as English as a Second Language learners, compared to the other three schools in Concord where the population is less than 10 percent.

While Kigugu said the district has attempted to engage families, hosting a few meetings to talk about the changes to the middle school, the lack of an understanding about the project underscores a disconnect between the district and immigrant parents.

To many, the school board, and its subsequent power, are unfamiliar. Words like “charter amendment” are a foreign concept to most. Without any engagement, which he emphasizes is mutual, it's hard for immigrant parents to think of the school and their own influence beyond their kids in a classroom.

“We as New Americans, we need to learn the school system, how it works,” he said. “Also the school district needs to learn about the New American culture.”

Fisto Ndayishimiye graduated from Concord High School in 2019 after immigrating to New Hampshire from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

He could be convinced about relocating the middle school. A community organizer leading a group called Change For Concord, Ndayishimiye has long been a strong proponent of building out resources in the Heights. To him, the current epicenter of Concord's downtown only reinforced racial and economic segregation.

But he hasn't heard a compelling argument to relocate the school from the school district. In fact, he's heard little from school leaders and knows that families in Concord's immigrant community have heard even less.

To him, that effort needs to span school board meetings or information sessions at the district offices across town. School leaders should meet immigrant families where they're at – attending a church service over the weekend or hosting events in the Heights outside of working hours, with facilitators present.

“People continue to argue, ‘oh this is better, this is better,’ but honestly there's no marginalized community voices. They're not included in the conversation,” he said. “That makes me afraid of moving the middle school without having conversations with families over there and making sure that this is a positive decision for everybody.”

Outreach and understanding

To kick off the school year, Concord School District invited parents to Keach



GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor staff

Pastor Clement Kigugu believes the school should stay where it is.

Park for a back-to-school night.

Ahead of the event, Charm Emiko – who founded Project S.T.O.R.Y., an organization that supports immigrant children in Concord – saw dozens of fliers, posts online and direct outreach to families to attend.

And those efforts worked.

At the park, staff answered enrollment questions and helped families connect to pediatricians and understand medical records required to attend school.

For educators at Broken Ground and Mill Brook, the event is the first step in connecting with families during the school year.

“All the resources were there, all the people were there,” said Kyle Repucci, the Broken Ground principal. “It was great that they could actually meet some folks that they were going to work with later.”

Throughout the year, home-to-school liaisons in each school will visit with families – getting to know students and parents in their space and forming a connection they hope leads to more familiarity and engagement.

“We meet them where they're at... just sit with them and talk with them and see how they're doing,” said Ruth Christino, the liaison at Broken Ground. “You know, get to know their children and carry it into school.”

The outreach for events like Keach Park night is what Emiko wished the district would have employed for the middle school relocation. To her, it's proof that they can, and do, break language barriers to engage families.

In this instance, though, that didn't happen.

“There has been nothing to my knowledge done to help educate other communities that necessarily, English is not a first language,” she said. “When I asked some of my families about it they're a little confused, especially if they don't have a child at the middle school. They have really no idea or they don't even know that's going on.”

'Easy for everbody'

For 17 years at Concord High School, Ghana Sharma walked students through algebraic equations and geometric proofs as a math tutor – in his official capacity at least.

As one of the only New American employees, though, his job included more than math. In a school district where 17 languages are spoken in addition to English, students need teachers with similar lived experiences.

On any given day Sharma translated forms, served as an interpreter and provided direct outreach to families who may not know how the public school system works otherwise. This year, he was relocated to Beaver Meadow Elementary School.

He immigrated to the United States as a refugee in 2009 with his wife. His two children attended Concord schools – one graduated and is now in college while the other is a freshman at Concord High School.

“As a parent of a New American student, employment diversity is one of the most important things,” he said. “If we do that it will be easy for everybody.”

For families in the district, where English isn't their first language, interpreters are available for school meetings, back-to-school nights and other events through Language Bank, a translation service in Manchester. Parents can also set a default language for online communication with the district.

These tools help the school system connect with parents, said Sharma. At the end of the day, though, there are still gaps that can only be filled by hiring people who are able to directly relate to and engage with immigrant families.

“So many things, cultural ways of speaking, the native dialog, and there are so many things going on, right?” he said. “That's why I think employment diversity is the conclusion.”

The bureaucracy of a school board and decisions made beyond the classroom curriculum are not of concern to many families, said Sharma. In many ways, families don't care where a new school is built, as long as they feel connected to and supported by staff.

“That doesn't impact the New American families wherever the school is,” he said.

And he can be more blunt about it, too.

“As a refugee student, I went to a school made out of bamboo. When there is rain, no school that day,” he said. “Quality of education is what matters, not the school building.”

Bernardo commuted downtown daily to Rundlett from the Heights with no problem. Preserving the South End location is a shared opinion she feels is vocal among her classmates, but not acknowledged by school board members or district leaders.

The relocation decision, though, opens a larger door to talk about equity in the district – and her list of improvements for Concord schools is plentiful.

She'd like to see social students' curriculum adjusted to be more inclusive and Advanced Placement African American History introduced as a course. These are all topics her club works on weekly.

And she echos Sharma's focus. Regardless of a school's location, without educators of color employed by the district, she only sees herself reflected in a few.

“I would love to see more diversity in our staff,” she said. “The only diversity I really see is within our cleaning custodians, which is really sad to see.”

FAQs

**Q: Are New American families being engaged in the planning process for a new Concord middle school?**

A: Non-native English-speaking families have expressed feeling excluded from the decision-making process. Key information has largely been communicated in English only, making it difficult for families whose first language is not English to fully understand or participate in discussions around the new middle school.

**Q: What role does diversity and equity play in the decision-making and planning for the new school?**

A: While diversity and inclusion are among the district's stated priorities, families and community leaders are concerned that these principles are not being fully integrated into the planning process. Many have noted the lack of outreach to culturally diverse communities, which they feel perpetuates a disconnect between district leaders and families of color.

**Q: What are some potential benefits of relocating the middle school from the South End of Concord to the East Side?**

A: Supporters of the relocation believe that placing the middle school in East Concord could lead to greater investment in the Heights area, such as improved infrastructure, new sidewalks, and better traffic patterns. They see this as a necessary step to make the city more accessible and equitable for all residents.

**Q: What are some potential drawbacks of relocating the middle school?**

A: Community leaders have raised concerns about relocating the middle school as they fear it will cut off transportation to Concord's downtown for families. Memorial Field, the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Club are a few of many facilities middle school students access near Rundlett's current location in the South end.

**Q: What is the distance between the current Rundlett site and the proposed new location near Broken Ground?**

A: The two sites are just over 5 miles apart. Relocating the middle school to East Concord means the new school will sit on the other side of the city, across the Merrimack River.

**Q: How many students in the Concord School District are English Language Learners?**

A: Mill Brook and Broken Ground elementary schools have the highest percentage of English Language Learners, non-native speaking students, with 15 and 18 percent respectively in 2023. The remaining three elementary schools – and Rundlett Middle School and Concord High School – all have populations of less than 10 percent.

**Q: What are the demographic breakdowns of schools in Concord?**

A: Mill Brook and Broken Ground elementary schools are the city's most diverse, with 68.5 percent and 72 percent of students identifying as white, respectively. At Mill Brook 18 percent of students are Black and less than 10 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander. At Broken Ground, 15 percent of the student body is Black, less than 10 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander and less than 10 percent Hispanic or Latino. At the three other elementary schools – Christa McAuliffe, Beaver Meadow and Abbott Downing – over 84 percent of students identify as white.

**Q: How many refugees have resettled in New Hampshire?**

A: Since 2011, 4,574 people have resettled in New Hampshire, with one-third of that population, just over 1,500, moving to the Concord area. Immigration numbers hovered just above or below 200 from 2011 to 2016 before declining rapidly, to as low as 14 in 2020, before spiking again at 81 in 2022. Last year, 25 people resettled in Concord.

**Q: What support is available in school for non-native English speaking students?**

A: All schools in Concord have programming for English Language Learners that caters to all levels of English proficiency. “Push-in” instruction is available for students, where ELL teachers are in the classroom assisting material or students participate in “pullout” instruction, where they meet in small groups outside of class.

**Q: What support is available for non-native English speaking parents?**

A: All online communication from the school district can be translated with the use of Parent Square, the platform Concord uses to share announcements and other information. For in person school events, like back to school night, parents can request translators through the Language Bank, a translation service based in Manchester. Home-school liaisons also make visits to students houses to learn more about the families and connect with parents in their own space.



**RETHINKING RUNDLETT:** Concord residents divided on reversing the middle school site vote, but united in support of ballot questions to take power away from school board

# MEASURED DECISIONS



Former Concord School Board member Mary Blaisdell was part of the Rundlett Middle School survey. Blaisdell served on the board when her sons were in school in the 1980s.

GEOFF FORESTER—Monitor staff

By JEREMY MARGOLIS  
Monitor staff

## MONITOR POLL

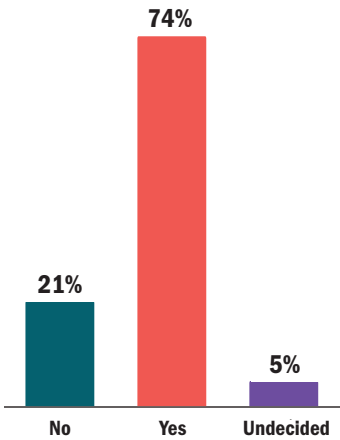
An overwhelming majority of Concord residents support stripping the Concord School Board of some of its power, yet residents are split on whether the decision to build a new middle school about six miles away from the current location should be reversed, a Monitor poll found.

Seventy-four percent of residents said the school board should be required to get voter approval for all school building moves or property sales. Currently, the autonomous school district can make those decisions unilaterally, but a pair of charter amendments on the November ballot would change that. The support expressed in the Monitor poll surpasses the 60% threshold required for the amendments' passage.

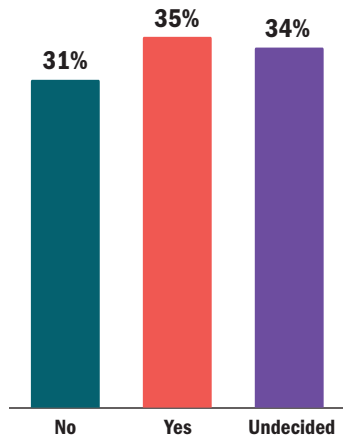
"I know some of the people on the school board. I know they're elected, but they still have to an-

SEE POLL A5

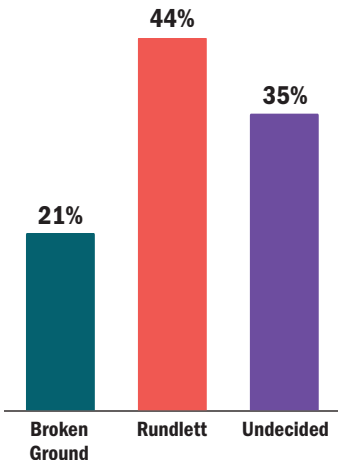
### In general, should moving a school building require voter approval?



### Should the decision to build at the Broken Ground site be reversed now?



### Which location should have been picked for the new school?



# Teachers express sense of urgency

They favor Broken Ground site for faster construction schedule to build new middle school

By JEREMY MARGOLIS  
Monitor staff

Rundlett Middle School's three eighth-grade science teachers have grown accustomed to nature's intrusions.

Last year, a bird laid six eggs in the exhaust pipe connected to Amy Schaeffner's fume hood. When the nest grew too heavy, the pipe broke

and a baby bird's leg burst through her classroom's ceiling.

"We ended up doing a rescue mission; I'm gonna just leave it at that," Schaeffner said in an interview.

After a science lab that involved pumpkin seeds, plants began to sprout from the sinks in science teachers Michelle Ruopp's and Sarah Grant's classrooms.

Schaeffner, Ruopp, and Grant have also fended off more traditional pests, including termites, cockroaches, and bees. And when rain

SEE TEACHERS A6



Rundlett science teacher Michelle Ruopp has to use the lower turn-off valve to shut off the eyewash station in her classroom on Monday.

GEOFF FORESTER  
Monitor staff

## ELECTION 2024

# Biden draws crowd at NHTI

At Concord event, young voters look ahead to engaging with a new, more relatable ticket

By MICHAELA TOWFIGHI  
Monitor staff

Danielle Feole knew the drill taking her son Joey, 6, to see President Joe Biden.

The wait to hear the president would be long, so she packed an iPad and Grey, the stuffed animal wolf that's attached to her son's hip.

The afternoon in Concord would be memorable – Joey, with a gap tooth smile absent two front teeth, put on a tie and a button down shirt – to join hundreds of others at NHTI to see the sitting president.

"I just want him to be aware of the world and the different issues," she said. "And know that he has a voice and I want him to be involved."

Feole, 44, drove up to Concord from Salem to see Biden alongside U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders and members of New Hampshire's federal delegation.

Biden painted a grim picture of healthcare in America. In the richest country in the world, people lay in bed at night, stressing over unexpected medical bills and high healthcare costs, he said.

"It's not capitalism. It is exploitation," Biden said. "When Big

SEE BIDEN A2

## ALLENSTOWN

# Rail trail adds to recreation in the region

By RACHEL WACHMAN  
Monitor staff

Sunlight streamed through the trees and gravel crunched underfoot as a small group of town officials gathered at the entrance of Allentown's new mile-long rail trail connecting to Hooksett.

After a year and a half of work clearing the trail, laying new ground material, and rebuilding three wooden bridges along the path, the town celebrated the trail's opening on Monday afternoon. The former rail bed offers a wide, flat path through the trees for people looking to get a breath of fresh air.

"It provides a spot where our residents can go and walk and exercise and be outdoors, whether by themselves or with their children, without

SEE ALLENTOWN A4



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THE RETHINKING RUNDLETT SERIES

THE HISTORY

A divisive school decision in Concord, again, nearly 70 years after a 1955 vote. Plus, we examine the costs of the project of what the school district isn't saying.

ANOTHER CITY'S APPROACH

We look at how Concord's plan compares to other school projects in the state, including a recently build school in Nashua.

CRITICAL VOICES

Even though equity was cited as a reason to move the middle school, New Americans say they feel left out of the process.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Many teachers support the new site out of a sense of urgency to get into a new school as soon as possible because of Rundlett's poor learning conditions.

ON THE FIELDS

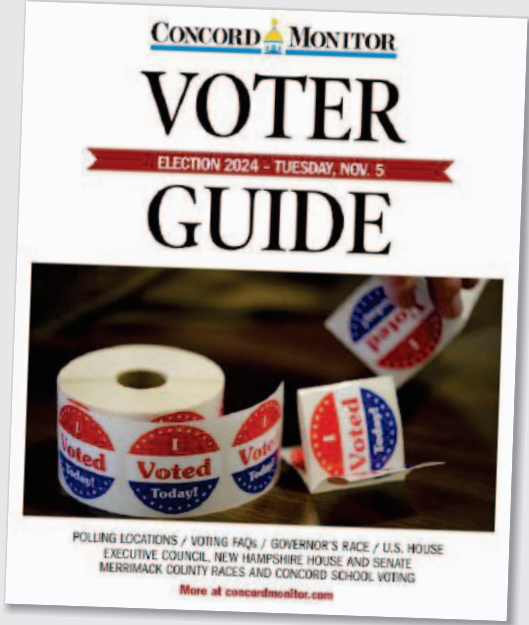
How will building a new middle school on the East Side of Concord affect Memorial Field plans?

THE ROAD TO SCHOOL

Estimating the number of future students can be tricky; busing them is more straightforward.

RESIDENT POLL

We conducted a citywide poll. Here's how 100 randomly-selected residents responded.



PREPARE TO VOTE

Make sure to pick up the Saturday, Nov. 2 Monitor, which will include a 2024 Election Voter Guide. You'll find quick-glance coverage of the major races in New Hampshire. You'll also be able to get the same information, plus lots of previous election coverage in our online voter guide at concordmonitor.com.

CANDIDATE FORUM AND DISCUSSION

LEARN MORE AT OUR EVENT ON OCT. 24

- The Concord Monitor will host a two-part event on Thursday at the Concord High School auditorium that will include a forum with the six candidates running for school board, followed by a moderated discussion about the “Rethinking Rundlett” series. The six candidates up for election for three school board seats include Board President Pam Walsh, fellow incumbent Barb Higgins and challengers Alex Winters, Sarah Sadowski, Joseph Scroggins and Clint Cogswell, who previously served on the board. The candidate forum will run from 6:30 to 8 p.m.
- The candidate forum will be followed by a community discussion of the Monitor's Rethinking Rundlett series.
- The event is Thursday, Oct. 24, 6:30 to 9 p.m. at Concord High's Christa McAuliffe Auditorium, 170 Warren St., Concord

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU: Have questions about the middle school plans? Email us at news@cmonitor.com with Rethinking Rundlett in the subject line

Rethinking Rundlett: Concord residents polled

POLL FROM A1

swer to the public,” said Steve Sawyer, 67, a poll respondent from Ward 10 who supports the charter amendments. “I’m in real estate and do a lot of construction, and line-by-line they show where the money’s going. If they could do that here, then I think people would have a better feeling on building the new school.”

While some have framed the amendments as a referendum on the school board’s controversial decision last December to relocate the middle school to 24 acres of raw land near the Broken Ground and Mill Brook schools, residents are split on whether the decision should be reversed now, with about 35% saying they are in favor going back, 31% who support the decision and 34% who said they weren’t sure.

Of the 31% who say they support moving the middle school to the city’s east side, 21% agreed with the initial decision, while 10% disagreed or were undecided on it but don’t want to see it reversed now.

Clara Dietel, 43, a mother of two from Ward 5, didn’t have a strong opinion on the initial decision but doesn’t want to see it flipped now.

“I feel the decision’s been made,” Dietel said. “At this point, I don’t think either of my kids will be able to benefit, but I’d just rather see it get built.”

The Monitor’s poll results are based on the answers of 100 residents to a 15-question poll administered from Oct. 1 to 10. Streets in every city ward – except Ward 1, which is primarily in the Merrimack Valley School District – were randomly selected and reporters went door-to-door. In all, residents residing on 36 different streets were polled. (More information about the methodology of the poll is below.)

The results show that 44% of residents believe the Concord school district erred when it selected Broken Ground for the site of its next middle school. Of those who had made up their minds, twice as many residents opposed the initial decision as supported it – but due to the number of people who were still undecided, it was short of a majority of those surveyed.

While a vocal group of residents have protested the decision made late last year to build the district’s new middle school on the city’s east side rather than next to its current location in the city’s south end, it’s far from a small minority.

Importantly, while the amendments were motivated by frustration over the middle school location decision, it remains unclear whether their passage would trigger a vote on the location of the project itself. The language of the first question requires a district-wide vote when a school is “relocated.”

School board members have argued that since the vote to relocate the middle school was taken last December, the amendment would not apply retroactively to the middle school even though the design



GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor staff

**Steven Sawyer grew up in Nashua and moved into a new school before graduating in 1977. He raised his children in Concord and believes a new school near Broken Ground will afford the students the modern technology they need, just like he got back in the 1970s.**

and bond for the project have not been approved. That assertion could end up being challenged in court if the amendments pass.

The actual question on the ballot reads, “No Concord public school existing as of January 1, 2024, including but not limited to the district’s middle school, (Rundlett Middle School), shall be relocated from the parcel on which it was situated as of January 1, 2024, to be rebuilt or replaced elsewhere, without an affirmative simple majority vote of Concord School District voters voting on the question ratifying such relocation.”

Other notable findings

Respondents’ family status, age, and household income – factors that are interrelated – all affected sentiment on the initial decision to relocate the middle school.

■ A higher percentage of people without children (48% opposed) currently attending Concord schools were opposed to the initial decision than people with children (33% opposed). Those with children in fourth grade or lower – the students who would attend the new middle school under the current timeline – were in fact slightly more opposed to the decision than those who had children in the older grades exclusively.

■ Residents who were 65 or older were nearly twice as likely to oppose the initial decision (57% opposition) as residents who were between 18 and 34 (33% opposition).

■ Residents with a household income below the median in Concord of \$80,000 were 12 percentage points more likely to oppose the initial location decision (51% opposition) than residents with a household income above the median (39% opposition).

Opposition to the initial decision varied by ward – though sample sizes for ward-level data are quite small with the Monitor surveying between 8 and 16 people per ward.

■ Ward 7, which includes Rundlett, was the most strongly opposed (64% opposition) of the nine wards in which the poll was conducted.

■ Ward 10, which is one of Concord’s largest geographic voting areas but also includes

Broken Ground, was evenly split (38% opposition and support; 25% undecided).

■ Ward 3 was the only ward in which supporters of the initial decision outnumbered opponents (45% support versus 9% opposition).

Generally, the survey found that opinions on the charter amendments were tied to opinions on the initial decision.

■ Those who opposed the initial decision overwhelmingly supported the charter amendments (93% support), while those who supported or were undecided on the initial location were about evenly split on the charter amendments (52% support).

■ People without children in the district were more likely to support the charter amendments (79% support) than people with children currently or expected to be in the school district (59% support).

The charter amendment ballot questions may not necessarily be the referendums on the middle school location some are making them out to be.

■ While three-quarters of respondents support passage of the charter amendments, only 35% support reversing the middle school location decision now.

■ Put another way, 42% of respondents both support the amendments and either oppose or have no opinion on reversing the middle school location decision.

Respondents were asked how important the following four factors of the middle school project were to them: the cost, the location, the environmental impact, and the duration of construction.

■ Overall, the environmental impact and cost were most important (3.77 and 3.73 on a 1 to 5 scale, respectively), while the duration was the least important (2.81).

■ Surprisingly, the duration was the least important factor even for families of children who would attend the new school under the current timeline. Moreover, it was not any more important to them than to respondents at-large.

Methodology

In consultation with the

UNH Survey Center, the Monitor devised its methodology and decided an in-person survey was the best choice instead of other methods, like a phone poll or mailed questionnaire.

Street names were randomized within each ward (exclusive of Ward 1, which was omitted from the poll because it is primarily in the Merrimack Valley School District). Starting at the top of the randomized list, reporters then went door-to-door, moving to the next street once they had received five responses or they had reached the street’s end. Streets that were very rural or were primarily commercial were generally skipped.

Reporters explained to those who answered their doors that they were conducting an anonymous poll about the middle school project on behalf of the Monitor. (Though the responses to the poll were anonymous, respondents were asked at the end of the poll whether they would be willing to be contacted by a reporter in the future to share their views publicly.)

Even if respondents were not aware the school district was in the process of building a new middle school (16% of respondents), the reporter still proceeded with the poll. The reporter asked the questions verbally, filling out the answers on a Google form.

The goal was to get 11 responses in each ward, though some wards proved easier than others. Between 8 and 16 responses were collected in each ward, for a total of 100 responses. Weighting responses based off ward-level participation in the most recent election did not dramatically skew results.

This method presented a number of limitations. First, while it incorporates randomness, it is not totally random because certain streets were deemed inaccessible and thus skipped. The survey was generally conducted between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m. on weeknights, which excludes those who are not home during that time period. Apartment buildings were also more likely to be inaccessible than one-family homes. Lastly, the Monitor was unable to administer the survey in languages other than English.

Though the survey samples were collected fairly uniformly, wards are not evenly represented in elections. In 2023, for example, 20% of votes in the school board election came from Ward 5, while 5% came from Ward 2. When analyzing the data, the Monitor considered weighting responses according to participation in the 2023 election but found that doing so did not significantly alter results. As a result, the results reported are unweighted.

Responses to the Monitor’s poll were collected by Geoff Forester, Sruthi Gopalakrishnan, Jeremy Margolis, Charlotte Matherly, Catherine McLaughlin, Alexander Rapp, Michaela Towfighi, Jonathan Van Fleet and Rachel Wachman. The poll design and analysis was completed by Jeremy Margolis.

FAQs

**Q: Why did the Monitor decide to conduct a city-wide poll?**

A: Vocal criticism of the school board’s decision to build a new middle school on the Broken Ground site has dominated discussion on this issue. We wanted to glean how widely these views were represented in the city. We decided a random survey was the best way to do so.

**Q: What do the poll results tell us?**

A: Residents are about evenly split on whether the middle school decision should be reversed. The most uniform agreement came with respect to the charter amendments, which nearly three-quarters of respondents supported.

**Q: What’s the deal with these charter amendments?**

A: A group of residents frustrated by the decision to relocate the middle school gathered enough signatures to put two questions on district voters’ ballots that would strip the school board of some of its autonomy. Notably, neither amendment would automatically reverse the decision to build the new middle school at the Broken Ground site, but one of them could prompt a separate district-wide vote on the location. More on that below.

**Q: What do the amendments say?**

A: The first question says: “No Concord public school existing as of January 1, 2024, including but not limited to the District’s middle school, (Rundlett Middle School), shall be relocated from the parcel on which it was situated as of January 1, 2024, to be rebuilt or replaced elsewhere, without an affirmative simple majority vote of Concord School District voters voting on the question ratifying such relocation.

The second charter amendment says: “No parcel of real property owned by the Concord School District, larger than one acre, shall be sold, gifted, or exchanged by the District without an affirmative simple majority vote of Concord School District voters voting on the question.”

**Q: What do the amendments mean in plain English?**

The first amendment would require a majority vote of school district residents whenever the district wishes to move a school from one location to another. The second amendment would require a majority vote whenever the school district wishes to get rid of land it owns that is larger than one acre.

**Q: What are the arguments for the charter amendments?**

A: The Concord School Board is the only fully autonomous school board in the state, meaning it can set its budget without getting approval from voters or the city council. While these amendments would not change that, supporters argue they would give residents some say over major decisions the board makes.

**Q: What are the arguments against the charter amendments?**

A: Opponents of the amendments argue that school board members are elected to make decisions that often require significant research and subject-matter expertise. They say these amendments would slow down processes and could place the district in a bind in the event of an emergency, such as a building fire.

**Q: What threshold is required for the amendments’ passage?**

A: The amendments require 60% approval. This is higher than the 50% threshold set out in state law.

**Q: If the amendments are approved, what effect will they have on the location of the next middle school?**

A: That’s still unclear. The school board contends that the decision has already been made and that charter amendments can’t be applied retroactively. The opponents of the Broken Ground site argue that though the school board has decided to move the school, the move itself has not taken place yet.

**Q: Would passage of the charter amendments delay the middle school project?**

A: If the amendment pass the school board challenges the results in court, it would result in some delay. Even if the board decided against litigating, a vote on the middle school location would have to be scheduled, unless the board decides to reverse course and rebuild at Rundlett. If it decided to reverse course, the project would be delayed since some of the design work already underway would have to be redone.



# Current Rundlett Middle School teachers express sense of urgency

TEACHERS FROM A1

falls, it is water rather than living creatures that seeps through the roof's openings.

"If we abandon this building, I think nature will take it back," Shaeffner predicted.

Proponents of building Concord's new middle school at the Broken Ground site have touted the outdoor educational opportunities the rural location will unlock. While those opportunities excite the eighth-grade science teaching trio, their more immediate desire is simpler: a building where interactions with the natural world occur on the teachers' own terms, rather than at the whims of animals and weather.

Amid the frenzied debate over the location of the middle school project, the views of Rundlett's teachers have at times gone overlooked. Five middle school teachers interviewed for this story framed their support for the Broken Ground location as primarily motivated by the urgency of the need for a new building, rather than by any intrinsic quality of the site.

"We're working in a place that's just falling down around us," Ruopp said.

Reversing course on the new middle school's location and rebuilding it next to the current school would likely delay the project's completion by three years, until 2030, a representative from the school district's construction management firm predicted this month.

That type of information contradicts what the school district has said about building at the South Street location previously – in 2017 HMFH architects told the school board that construction of a new school at the Rundlett site could take three years and four months and cost \$75 million. The district's current plan calls for constructing a 200,000 square foot school with new athletic fields on 24 acres of raw land on the city's East side for \$152 million. For comparison, the current Rundlett school is about 150,000 square feet and sits just under 20 acres of land, which includes



Rundlett science teachers Michelle Ruopp, left, and Sarah Grant, center, look up on Monday as fellow teacher Amy Schaeffner points to the area where water comes through and where a bird laid six eggs in her classroom.

GEOFF FORESTER—Monitor staff

playing fields.

Ruopp, who lives near Rundlett and has young children, had initially looked forward to the prospect of working within walking distance of her kids while they attend Abbott-Downing Elementary School, which is next to Rundlett.

"But my viewpoint has completely changed because I think if there's going to be a delay, that is way worse," Ruopp said. "We need the new school. That takes priority over any personal preference I have over just being close to my kids."

If the district were to rebuild at Rundlett, teachers also expressed grave concerns about the prospect of contending with construction-related disruptions for multiple years on top of the daily building-related challenges they already face.

"Hearing these vehicles backing up, beeping all the time, and jackhammers and concrete, it would be insanely challenging," Rundlett language arts teacher Linda

O'Rourke said.

At the current Rundlett location, the footprint of the new school would likely come within 30 feet of the existing school, school board President Pamela Walsh has said. The project would also be built on the middle school's playing fields, and new fields would presumably not become available until after the current building was demolished.

The structural, safety, and accessibility issues of Rundlett, which opened as a junior high school in 1957, are fairly well-documented and even those who disagree on the project's planned location admit the district needs a new middle school.

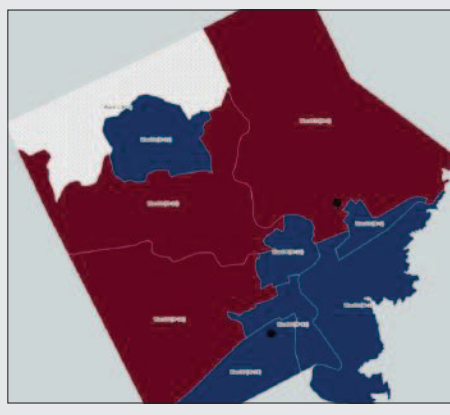
But teachers and district administrators said the public may not appreciate the depths of the issues and the reality of

what another seven years in the current building could look like.

Already this year, the district's custodial team has replaced at least 300 ceiling tiles, principal Jay Richard said. Temperatures in the building's classrooms can soar into the 90s. Limits on the school's facilities mean certain educational opportunities pass students by.

Somayeh Kashi, an art and technology education teacher, said her students don't have access to a computer lab for their tech ed classes. And her classroom has about four outlets, which means students are out of luck when their Chromebooks lose power.

The state of the building is "appalling," Kashi said. "Kids are supposed to come in here and learn. And this is the capi-



**CLOSER TO HOME**

How do views on last year's decision to move the middle school from the South End to near Broken Ground vary by ward?

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tal of the state – it's really embarrassing."

Though it was far from her primary rationale for supporting the Broken Ground site, Kashi said she would love to take advantage of the landscape drawing opportunities that the 120 acres of city-owned forest in close proximity to the Broken Ground site would afford. She also said the natural setting could benefit students' and staff's mental health.

The eighth-grade science teachers likewise expressed excitement at the opportunities for outdoor lab work.

"We do try to take the kids outside now when we can, but there's literally a dirt field behind our rooms over here, and if it rains it's all muddy, and there's not a lot of vegetation, and it's all playing fields," Schaeffner said. "So to get to any wooded areas from here is kind of a management nightmare, honestly."

The equity argument in favor of the Broken Ground site – that having a school closer to where many of the city's New Americans and students of color live would benefit them – did not come up in interviews. Eighteen percent and 15% of the students at the two elementary schools next to the planned site – Broken Ground

and Mill Brook – are English language learners, respectively, compared to less than 10% at the other three elementary schools, according to data from the Department of Education.

The two schools collectively enroll about half of the K-5 students in the district so moving the middle school within walking distance of them would effectively create a second district campus with as many students as Concord High. (District administrators have said construction would not materially disrupt the elementary schools because the distance to the planned middle school is significantly further than the distance would be if the district instead rebuilt next to Rundlett.)

But neither the equity nor the outdoor opportunities arguments drove the teachers' support for the Broken Ground site, which was wholly motivated by the urgency for a new building they feel daily.

"At this point, I just really feel like I don't care what you think about the location," Kashi said. "It just needs to happen at this point. We cannot continue to postpone this any further."

Jeremy Margolis can be contacted at [jmargolis@concordmonitor.com](mailto:jmargolis@concordmonitor.com).

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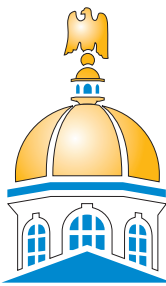
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RETHINKING RUNDLETT

# A warning comes home to roost

Parents, teachers and former school board president say charter amendments are the wrong approach to middle school decision

By CATHERINE McLAUGHLIN  
Monitor staff

Kass Ardinger saw this coming. Last December, when the Concord School Board seemed poised to relocate the middle school across the river, she issued a warning.

More than 100 people had turned out to the meeting, urging the board to rebuild Rundlett Middle School where it currently is. While the board had held hearings over the last few months, it was clear to Ardinger that the public didn't understand the opinion of the board, that the Broken Ground location in East Concord would be better.

If the board moved forward, she knew people would respond by trying to change the school board's autonomous power. She knew this because

SEE VOTE A5

## What do the charter amendments mean?

We've heard from several Concord residents who are confused by the wording of the charter amendments on the Nov. 5 ballot. Monitor reporter Jeremy Margolis breaks them down in plain English. **Story, Page A6**

CONCORD

# Five pledge to heed majority

Ballot questions need 60% to pass but most candidates say they will follow simple majority

By CHARLOTTE MATHERLY  
Monitor staff

Five out of six school board candidates pledged to respect a majority vote on the ballot referendums that will face Concord voters on Nov. 5 – even if the measures fail to reach the 60% threshold to amend the school district's charter.

The votes, which were born out of the controversial decision to relocate Rundlett Middle School but would apply more broadly to future projects, will determine whether the school board has to seek voter approval when it wants to move a school and when it wants to sell a substantial piece of property.

"A majority vote on the charter amendments would indicate fractured public trust in this decision, to me," Sarah Sadowski, one of the challengers, said at a forum hosted by the Monitor on Thursday. "It is extremely important and on the minds of voters in this community. I am 'team revisit' all the way anyway, because I think this has been a flawed public process."

Four other candidates – current board member Barb Higgins and three challengers, former board member Clint Cogswell,

SEE FORUM A4

FRANKLIN

# Past mayor fined for deleted email

By MICHAELA TOWFIGHI  
Monitor staff

Former Franklin mayor Jo Brown was fined by a judge Friday for using a private email account for official city business after she did not produce all requested documents in an ongoing lawsuit filed by a business owner against the city.

Miriam Kovacs, owner of the Broken Spoon, filed a lawsuit in 2023 accusing city staff and the police department of failing to protect her after she was targeted by a neo-Nazi organization the summer prior and violated her right to free speech by retaliating against her after she pub-

SEE FRANKLIN A6



CHIP GRIFFIN / Photos by Chip

Sebastian Telus (35) is a freshman tight end for the Crimson Tide and a saxophone player in the marching band.

# DIFFERENT KIND OF PLAY

By ALEXANDER RAPP  
Monitor staff

At halftime of Concord High School's football games, the team huddles around the coach as it retools its attack.

But a few players like linemen Jacob Breau, Damon Corbett, and Jacoby Cruz get no rest at half. These football players switch mental gears from hard-nosed play to focused musical moves within a few minutes as the marching band rolls onto the field, all while still wearing full pads.

These players aren't the only athletes out there marching and switching gears quickly, as others hop off the bus from a game elsewhere and run out in the nick of time.

At Concord High School, more than half of the Crimson Tide's marching band participates in an athletic program at junior varsity or

varsity levels, breaking the stereotype that sports is for "jocks" and band is for "geeks."

Ditching a helmet for a trombone isn't a huge switch for Breau when he looks at it from the broader perspective of being part of a school community.

"I feel like we're all connected because we all know we all put in a bunch of time and effort into what we do," said Breau, a senior. "Playing an instrument takes a lot of time and effort, and we all understand that."

Band directors Gabe Cohen and Brin Cowette work to eliminate stereotypes and barriers by communicating with coaches and students to ensure players will be able to attend and participate in band and athletics events with ease.

SEE BAND A8



CHIP GRIFFIN / Photos by Chip

Ramon Reynolds plays the saxophone at halftime while the rest of the team goes into the locker room to game-plan.

"Playing in a long show, like having that focus, you feel like it helps to your mental endurance when you're in the game."

JACOBY CRUZ, Concord High junior football player and band member

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# Five of six candidates say they will honor majority vote on amendments

FORUM FROM A1

disaster restoration project manager Joseph Scroggins and attorney Andrew Winters – all agreed.

Several of them said they're running on a mission to rethink the Rundlett decision no matter what.

Pam Walsh, the current school board president, was the only candidate who didn't commit either way.

"I would have to wait and look at what the cost would be, what it might mean for building aid and evaluate all of those things," Walsh said. "The charter amendment actually leads to a more expensive project."

Cogswell and Walsh said they don't support the referendums. Scroggins and Winters do, calling for more checks on school board authority and more connectivity with the City Council. Higgins said she doesn't approve of the specifics but supports them if that's what constituents want. Sadowski, who signed the petition to get the votes added to the ballot, declined to share her opinion and said she doesn't want to put her thumb on the scale – it should be up to voters, she said.

All candidates agreed that if the voters pass the 60% threshold, they would apply to the Rundlett decision, setting the stage for a potential referendum.

### Cost of Rundlett

The current school board has maintained that it's too late to turn back on Rundlett – it would seemingly cost taxpayers millions more and delay the project, though it hasn't provided the public with numbers on the site development costs to build on the raw land at the Broken Ground site, which may or may not be more than the cost of delays.

As many voters have expressed wariness over costs and tax increases – both to the school board directly and in a Monitor poll on Rundlett – the six candidates running for three seats on the Concord School Board echoed those concerns.

Overall, they bemoaned the source of their budget issues – scant funding from the state and rising costs of services they are required to provide, but steered away from specific answers on any budget cuts or new sources of revenue.

Winters said one of his primary concerns is the continuing erosion of student enroll-



From left, Monitor reporters Jeremy Margolis, Michaela Towfighi and Catherine McLaughlin ask questions of Concord School Board candidates Clint Cogswell, Barb Higgins, Sarah Sadowski, Joseph Scroggins, Pamela Walsh and Andrew Winters during a forum on Thursday at Concord High School.

ment. As Concord's school-age population declines and the city's population is expected to peak in 20 years, he said, the board could face longer-term problems.

"You're going to have fewer students, you're going to have a much-reduced pool of labor to choose from so you're going to have higher wages," Winters said. "There's major, major budgetary challenges ahead."

Several candidates said they'll advocate for more money from the state. A judge recently ordered New Hampshire to pay a larger share toward public education after another school district asserted the funding model was unconstitutional.

Some expenses are difficult for the school board to control, like transportation and special education costs and other services the district is legally obligated to provide.

Walsh added that the Concord School District is required to give special education help for students in charter schools, too. Each year, she said, the board has to weigh class sizes and the number of teachers to balance the budget.

"So much of our budget is out of our hands," Higgins said, comparing it to developing a picture in a dark room where you can't see your hands. "We have conflicted interests to need to keep the tax rate low, but we want to have good test scores and educate our children."

Scroggins said the new school building will increase taxes and require some budget cuts but urged the board to be more clear with constituents.

"We need a little more transparent approach," Scroggins said, and "go through a prioritization process and clearly communicate what has to happen."

Cogswell said the school board tries to reduce its budget, while providing a quality

education.

"I don't know the solution, but I do think that the school board is trying real hard to keep the budgets low," Cogswell said. "I wish we could stop the rising property taxes."

### Trans athletes

Candidates responded to questions on other issues facing the school district, including COVID learning loss and positions like a diversity, equity, inclusion and justice director for the school district and a school resource officer.

They also considered what the board should do if the district had a transgender girl who was banned from playing on girls' school sports teams due to a new state law.

Walsh voted with the rest of the board in 2021 to allow children to play on teams that correspond with their gender identity.

"I still support that," Walsh said. "Today, we offer extracurricular activities for academic reasons, to allow kids to learn important values, and every kid should have that chance."

Winters said while he's "personally inclined" to allow children to play on the team that corresponds with their gender identity, especially at these lower levels, the school district needs to follow the law.

Higgins, Sadowski, Scroggins said their priority is to protect and be welcoming to all students but didn't answer the question of whether they'd follow Kearsarge Regional School District, which chose not to enforce the law, citing potential Title IX violations. Higgins has previously said it's exclusionary to prioritize gender identity over biological

sex in sports. All three called for conversations with families and students if a trans girl wanted to play in Concord, and it could depend on the individual case.

Cogswell also did not directly answer the question but noted that trans youth have high rates of mental health issues and suicide and said he wishes he could do more to help.

### Potential positions

Concord's first director of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice transitioned to a new role this year, focusing on restorative justice at Rundlett Middle School. The superintendent has said the district has no plans to immediately fill the role, and the school board will need to redefine the position.

Candidates were split on how best to approach it – Walsh and Higgins support the step back to rethink it, with Walsh saying the job was too much for one person.

Sadowski said she'd want to fill the role and shape it with more focus on civic engagement, too.

"I think that that would very much be an appropriate use of public dollars," she said.

Others, like Scroggins and Winters, favor alternatives. Scroggins said he'd support the position if that's what the community wants but argued that DEIJ efforts also need "organic" support from students, teachers and existing groups in the school district.

"We have an opportunity to create a little more, let's say, outreach with those groups and leaders of those groups," Scroggins said. "I think we'll get greater impact that way."

Candidates' positions were similar on hiring a school re-

source officer – a decision that's gone before the school board and has been voted down. Many said they'd want to define the position in such a way that it wouldn't be a waste tax dollars; they also tended to favor other security measures over police officers.

Cogswell and Higgins said they'd need to determine the SRO's role. In Higgins' experience, she said an SRO at her former school was mostly busy interacting with kids and giving presentations to classes.

Walsh said a social worker could be a better fit and that she was "uncomfortable" adding a police officer to Concord schools. Winters, a former public defender, agreed and said while SROs are there to be a friendly face, police presence in schools can present equity and justice issues.

"They're not there to arrest the kids. They're there to just be a friendly face, but it seems like that is the role of our guidance counselors and our teachers," Winters said. "Police officers can be triggering for a lot of people."

Sadowski said she'd want to see evidence on the impact of SROs and solicit public opinion before making a decision.

### COVID learning loss

Concord students are recovering from learning gaps during the pandemic shutdown slower than other districts in New Hampshire, according to state data.

To boost academic performance, Scroggins said the district should solicit more feedback from teachers and support them. Sadowski said the district needs to think about its class sizes.

"We need to invest where it matters, where the evidence is clear: low student-teacher ratios, including having more teaching assistants in the classroom," Sadowski said.

Walsh, who initially ran for school board because of her own child's COVID learning loss, said the district has tried to boost its scores, but many challenges stem from an "inability" to hire more tu-

tors and instructional assistants.

Higgins said Concord shouldn't compare itself to other districts – instead, she argued, the board should focus on its own teachers and students.

Cogswell said he thinks the district is making strides in the right direction but that the learning gap is unavoidable, and Winters said he's unsure how to catch students up. He does, however, think the learning loss will naturally begin to fade and return to normalcy.

### Rebuilding trust

Several candidates acknowledged the decision to relocate the middle school on the East Side of the city last December has created division and mistrust from the public in the school board.

Winters and Sadowski called for more transparency from the school board to rebuild that trust, while Scroggins suggested board members go out into the community more to meet people where they're at and get feedback. Cogswell did not directly answer the question.

Walsh said the board couldn't have done better in the Rundlett process but said it's been difficult on her end, too.

"This is an ongoing public process, so you have this push-pull where people want all the answers at once but we haven't gotten to that part of the equation yet," Walsh said.

Higgins said while Rundlett has been contentious, the school board has done the best it can. Still, she said the board can do a better job of listening and acting on feedback.

In this election, she said, it's important to have a diverse board that can work together.

"Choose the three of us that you think can sit at a table and work with each other, and listen to you, and listen to one another, and get angry sometimes, and bite your tongue sometimes, and come to decisions that are best for the kids," Higgins said. "You decide, who do you feel good about?"



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# For opponent of charter amendments, a warning comes home to roost

VOTE FROM A1

she'd seen it before. Now, her prediction is playing out.

"History will always repeat itself," she said. "It's like Groundhog Day."

Ardinger chaired the school board throughout the elementary school consolidation just over a decade ago. A group of opponents tried unsuccessfully to get the Legislature — at the time the only group that could amend the district charter — to step in and override the board. That project certainly was divisive, just like the current one.

"There were some really hard meetings," she said. At the same time, "your goal as a school board member should be to get as much consensus as you can."

As its leader, she had tried to make sure that the school board brought its constituents into discussions: explaining decisions well in advance of making them, being upfront about what board members were thinking and why, and not being afraid to engage with people — either to correct them or to apologize.

In less than two weeks, voters will find two proposed changes to the school district charter on their Nov. 5 ballots.

Ardinger doesn't have an opinion on which school location would be better — and she does worry that reversing the vote will mean expensive delays. But if people in Concord want to revisit the Rundlett location decision, she said, the way to do that is by voting out members of the board, not by supporting the charter amendments.

By passing the amendments, "You're not taking it out on the board," she said. "It would have major consequences for the whole city."

Concord School Board's charter, its governing document, lays out its unique autonomy. No other school board in the state has the final say over its budget and other ma-



**Somayah Kashi, an art and technology teacher who started at Rundlett in 2014, has to use a stepstool to open and close the windows in her room daily. As a teacher, mother, and voter, Kashi wants the new middle school to be built near Broken Ground as soon as possible.**

jor decisions like union contracts without any oversight — all others must pass through a city council or voters at town meeting. These amendments, if approved and added to the charter, would modify that total independence for the first time since autonomy was implemented in 1961.

The first amendment would require the board to get majority voter approval to relocate a school. The second would require voter approval for the district to sell property.

Not only does Ardinger worry that putting voters in charge of these decisions will leave them open to special interests at times when there is less controversy — and therefore less attention on them — but she believes they will cost taxpayers money on future projects: The added variable of a constituent vote means the district won't get as good bond ratings, and the board won't have the same leverage to negotiate better prices when it does sell land, Ardinger said.

Like many of her neighbors and fellow district parents, Reagan Bissonnette wanted

Concord's new middle school to be rebuilt on its current site.

In January, when an online petition circulated demanding that board reconsider its decision to move it, a lot of people sent her a copy and urged her to sign. She didn't.

"I can understand why so many people were shocked and upset over the decision," Bissonnette said. "I was disappointed myself."

Despite thinking that the new school should remain on South Street — a belief she still holds — Bissonnette supports the project moving forward as planned.

Whether or not to support these amendments is not the same question as whether the school board chose the right location for the school. They are not a referendum on the location, she said.

They are, however, written with the intention of undoing the location vote and forcing the board to put that question to the voters. Whether that would actually happen,



**CATHERINE MCLAUGHLIN / Monitor staff**  
**Kass Ardinger, a member of the Concord School Board for nine years, five of which she spent as its leader. During that time, Concord built three new elementary schools and sold and demolished others.**

though, is disputed — both by the school district and by those in the 'vote no' group who argue they would not be legally binding to the current project.

"It's very clear that many of the people who have heard about the amendments or support the amendments, support them because they want to undo the decision," Bissonnette said. "But the amendments as written wouldn't clearly undo that."

The school board's attorney has argued that applying the first of the amendments to the middle school vote would be a retroactive application of a rule, which is illegal in New Hampshire.

When the Attorney General's Office reviewed the language in the amendments, the state gave no opinion about whether they would actually legally apply to this project.

A court battle is the biggest worry of Somayah Kashi, an art and technology teacher who started at Rundlett in 2014.

"When I got the job, they told me, 'We're getting a new building in three years,'" she said. "Every time we've had a new teacher for the last two years, they're like, 'oh, my God, I heard we're going to get new building!' and I'm like, 'Oh, you're so sweet, so new. I thought that too, ten years ago.'"

Kashi echoed the concerns of other teachers about the safety of the building.

Her first-floor classroom has reached 99 degrees on the warmest days. A fuse box located in her classroom, part of its outdated design, recently fell from the wall. She and other teachers, she said, have to take allergy medicine at times of seasonal allergies even though she's perfectly healthy.

"It cannot happen fast enough. That building is a health hazard," she said. "We cannot keep playing this game for another ten years."

Kashi isn't just a teacher at Rundlett. She's also a parent of a current eighth grader and a Concord taxpayer.

"Every time they delay this, this is just going to cost us more money to us taxpayers," she said. "We've spent millions of dollars already here with the architect, all the planning. We would actually have to throw millions of our tax dollars away. And for what?"

According to HMFH, the architectural firm hired by the district, the current school design would have to be altered to fit on the Rundlett site. If the school district reversed course, they have estimated that it would cost \$2.85 million to reconfigure the design and add two years to the project timeline. As discussed earlier in this series, the district has

estimated other additional costs tied to building at Rundlett as well, totaling millions of dollars.

Elizabeth Lahey's home was one of the first in the city to have a blue and green "Vote 'No'" sign on its lawn.

She agreed with the board's choice to put the new school near Broken Ground: It's where her daughter currently goes to school, and she thinks a great place to build a new one.

"They spend a lot of time out on the trails, a lot of time out in those woods, and I think it's just a real asset," she said.

But that preference isn't what's driving her opposition to the charter amendments.

Lahey worries that people will see voting for the amendments as a vote to rebuild at Rundlett when, regardless of the current dispute, they will have a much broader impact.

"What we're talking about is changing our structure of government," she said. "I think it's just bad precedent and bad practice to haphazardly amend a governing document because you're mad about one thing, or because something didn't turn out the way you thought that it should."

Ardinger echoed this sentiment.

She understands why people are frustrated with how the location decision was handled.

The charter is essentially the school board's version of a constitution. Ardinger fears that making even limited, but complicated, changes to it because of a specific project would have unintended consequences.

"It's just not the answer," she said.

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CONCORD

# School board charter amendments in plain English

City voters will decide two ballot questions to give public more oversight

By JEREMY MARGOLIS  
Monitor staff

Local election results in Concord on Nov. 5 will include tallies for a pair of amendments to the school district's charter that will give the public more say over major decisions involving school locations and property sales.

While those amendments have been tied to the district's controversial middle school project and could ultimately affect that project's future, neither is a direct vote on the location of the project.

Rather, the amendments would change the governance of the school district more broadly, forcing the board to secure district-wide voter approval whenever it wishes to either relocate a school building or sell more than one acre of property. Currently, the nine-member school board can take these actions on its own.

Here are some answers to frequently asked questions about the charter amendments.

What do the charter amendments say?

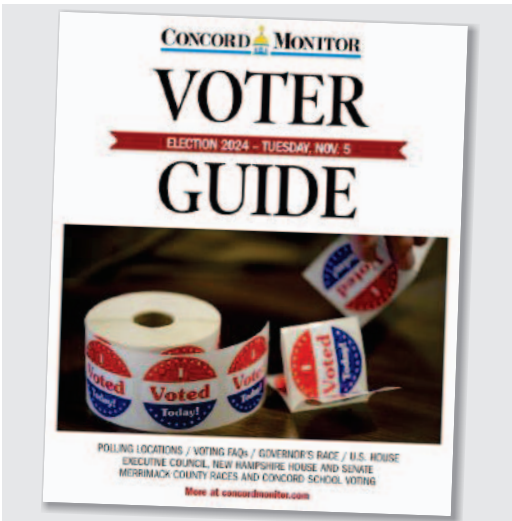
**Question 1:** "No Concord public school existing as of January 1, 2024, including but not limited to the District's middle school, (Rundlett Middle School), shall be relocated from the parcel on which it was situated as of January 1, 2024, to be rebuilt or replaced elsewhere, without an affirmative simple majority vote of Concord School District voters voting on the question ratifying such relocation."

**Question 2:** "No parcel of real property owned by the Concord School District, larger than one acre, shall be sold, gifted, or exchanged by the District without an affirmative simple majority vote of Concord School District voters voting on the question."

Both are intended to take effect immediately if they pass.

What do the amendments mean?

If question 1 passes, it would require the school district to get approval from a majority of voters any time it wishes to move a school from one location to another. Voters would have to make a decision during a regular city election or a specially scheduled election. The next municipal election in Concord is scheduled for Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2025.



PREPARE TO VOTE

Make sure to pick up the Saturday, Nov. 2 Monitor, which will include a 2024 Election Voter Guide. You'll find quick-glance coverage of the major races in New Hampshire. You'll also be able to get the same information, plus lots of previous election coverage in our online voter guide at concordmonitor.com.

If question 2 passes, it would require the school district to get approval from a majority of voters any time it wishes to sell, gift, or exchange more than one acre of land it owns. Currently, the school district can sell, gift, or exchange property without getting voter approval. Those decisions would also need to be made during a city-wide election.

I'm still confused about what a 'Yes' vote versus a 'No' vote means.

A "Yes" vote means you support implementing the new requirement to give the public more say over the district's property decisions. A "No" vote means you support the status quo.

If Question 1 passes, how will it affect the middle school project?

There are a number of ways the adoption of Question 1 could affect the future of the middle school project.

**A reconsideration by the school board:**

Though the school relocation amendment has been framed as a referendum on the middle school project, it is not directly a vote on that project. Nonetheless, because of how the amendment arose, strong majority support for it could signal significant community dissatisfaction with the board's decision to build the middle school at Broken Ground and lead the board to reopen and potentially reverse its decision. If the new school was built at the Rundlett site, it would not constitute a school relocation and would not trigger a city-wide vote.

**A vote:** If the board sticks with its decision to move the school to the Broken Ground land, the amendment would likely trigger a vote to approve relocating the middle school.

**A court battle:** It is not an absolute certainty the amendment would definitively trigger a vote because there is some argument over its applicability to the middle school. The school board's attorney has argued the decision would be exempt from a vote because New Hampshire does not allow retroactive application of charter amendments.

But not everyone agrees the applicability would be retroactive. Though the board has already voted on the location of the school, proponents of the amendment say the school would not actually be "relocated" until the funding and bond for the new building is approved. That decision has not yet been made.

The Attorney General's office has declined to opine on the issue. "That is an issue better resolved by the courts," Assistant Attorney General Brendan O'Donnell stated following his office's review of the amendments.

Current school board President Pamela Walsh, who is running for re-election and opposes both amendments, committed at a candidate forum on Thursday to "honor" the amendment's applicability to the middle school decision if it passes. Barb Higgins, the other incumbent running, and each of the four challengers have made the same commitment.

**A delay:** Passage of Question 1 would likely delay the completion of the project.

What's the deal with Question 2?

The amendment that would create a voter approval requirement for sales of property was motivated in part by a desire to have some control over the future of the Rundlett building if the middle school is indeed relocated. The district has yet to decide what it would do with the building. Following the consolidation of Con-

cord's elementary schools a decade ago, several of the former schools were sold.

What are the arguments in favor of the charter amendments?

The arguments in favor are two-fold. First, adoption of the amendments would likely reopen debate on the location of Concord's next middle school and give residents a vote over its future. Second, the amendments would strip the board of some of the unique power it holds. Concord is currently the only fully autonomous school board in the state, meaning it can set its budget without getting approval from voters or the city council. While neither amendment would affect the board's control over its budget, supporters argue the amendments would give residents some say over other major decisions the board makes on rare occasions.

What are the arguments in opposition to the charter amendments?

Passage of the amendments would likely delay the middle school project – perhaps significantly – which could increase costs due to inflation. More broadly, opponents of the amendments also argue that school board members are elected to make decisions that often require significant research and subject-matter expertise. They say these amendments would slow down planning and could place the district in a bind in the event of an emergency, such as a building fire.

Do you have to vote the same way on the questions?

No, you don't. They are separate questions and so you can vote "Yes" on one and "No" on the other.

Why are the amendments worded as statements rather than questions?

The language of the amendments would go directly into the school district's charter, the governing document for the district. You can think of the language as new rules for the district, rather than traditional ballot questions.

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## Former Franklin mayor fined for deleted email from private account

FRANKLIN FROM A1

lively criticized the city's response. The lawsuit names Brown, as well as Police Chief David Goldstein, City Manager Judie Milner, and other City Council and police staff specifically.

The city of Franklin was required to produce all documents related to Kovacs, her partner Mark Faro, the Broken Spoon and the neo-Nazi group, NCS-131. Documents included emails, text messages, among other notes and forms of communication.

Attorney James Soucy, who is representing Franklin, said the request produced approximately 10,500 documents.

Kovacs and her lawyer, Cassandra Moran, compared those documents to one she obtained through prior records requests she had filed with the city. They noted that



GEOFF FORESTER / Monitor file

**Miriam Kovacs, who opened a restaurant on Main Street in Franklin in 2020, filed a lawsuit in 2023 accusing city staff and the police department of failing to protect her after she was targeted by a neo-Nazi group.**

at least 27 emails from Brown's personal server were missing from the compilation. Documents from the court case only produced five emails from Brown's personal address.

"We can't say for sure what

else there is," said Moran. "We don't have access to it. But there are a lot more than five that the former mayor asserts that she does have."

At the end of Brown's term as mayor – which concluded in January after losing a re-election

campaign – she forwarded all emails from her personal account to her city email. She then deleted the emails from her personal account, Soucy said.

Superior Court rules, however, state that all parties are required to preserve access to relevant information once they have been named in a lawsuit. By deleting the emails, Brown violated this rule.

Merrimack Superior Court Judge Martin Honigberg agreed with Kovacs' complaint that Brown created an unnecessary burden to identify what was missing.

Brown will have to pay a fine to Kovacs' legal counsel, repaying the time and effort to contest the documents provided.

"Because the mayor chose to delete those emails and 'preserve' them outside of the

way they should have been preserved, she created work," said Honigberg. "She created work that didn't need to be done."

Kovacs has 30 days to file an affidavit with a calculation of the repayment costs.

The use of private email servers for city business is not a practice isolated in Franklin. For example, the city of Concord's website lists a personal email address for Mayor Byron Champlin.

Kovacs lawyers also filed a motion to compel Soucy to provide any remaining documents in a timely manner – as a matter to accelerate the case forward.

Moran accused the city of stalling the case. In March, a request for records was sent to all defendants with a deadline of April 20. Moran said she received a batch of 100 documents in June.

With six defendants and the city of Franklin at large, Moran said this production was not sufficient.

Kovacs has not been able to take any further steps in the case – like depositions with each defendant – until documents are produced.

"My client is continuing to experience the violation of her constitutional right, as alleged in the complaint because we can't resolve this matter," said Moran.

In December, the city of Franklin rejected a settlement offer from Kovacs, which asked the city to cover \$7,000 in legal fees and make internal reforms to the city's police department. That rejection sent the lawsuit to trial.

Both parties will now have to agree on a timeline for the case. Honinberg suggested a trial could be scheduled in early 2025.



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