

# New schools: A thankless job

**Carl Gustin**

Being a member of a school building committee is a thankless job. Just ask the former chairman of the Ipswich School Committee. After a Town Meeting vote for a new elementary school failed to pass a few months ago, the School Committee chairman decided to step down. The quest for a new elementary school in Ipswich appears dead, at least for now. At her last meeting, Chairman Sarah Player was honored by her colleagues for her leadership and for doing a thankless job." A proposal for a new school in Swampscott suffered a similar fate.

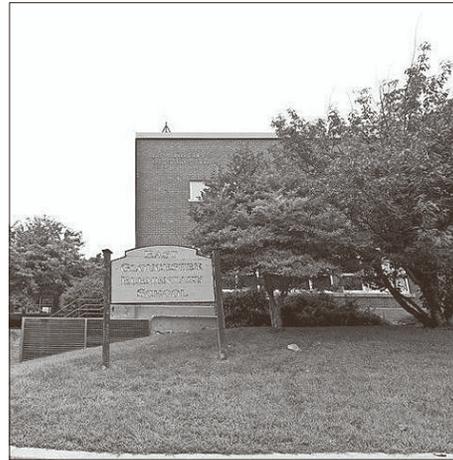
Who wins when plans for new schools are shot down? Not the kids, teachers and parents who see lost opportunities for a better education. And probably not the larger community.

Think about Gloucester and recent coverage of plans to renovate existing schools or build a new, larger one to meet contemporary needs and standards.

Two elementary schools -- East Gloucester and Veteran's, both built in the shadow of World War II -- crowd students and teachers into classrooms that were never designed to hold so many. The HVAC systems are inefficient. Kids and teachers shouldn't have to meet in hallways for reading classes. And what about technology? Kids who are growing up with the latest in technology at home are denied the learning tools found in schools throughout the state — and in other parts of Gloucester — because a World War II-era building is not designed to accommodate the networks and systems needed to leverage contemporary learning technology.

There are sensitive community issues beyond quality education. Preserving open spaces, holding on to the idea of neighborhood schools, transportation and of course costs to the community are all issues to be addressed by a school building committee. Public input is essential. Balance is important.

But, the Massachusetts School Building Authority found that East Gloucester elementary School needs serious help. It was one



PAUL BILODEAU/Staff file photo

**The city is eyeing three sites to build a new elementary school in East Gloucester. Pictured is the current East Gloucester Elementary School on Davis Street.**

of only 17 schools in the state selected for funding of a feasibility and design study. The state, in further recognition of significant need, then agreed to consider consolidation with Veteran's Memorial in the same initiative.

The School Building Committee's 16 members started work on the project three years ago. A look at the building committee's and the city's websites ([eastgloucesterbuilding-project.weebly.com](http://eastgloucesterbuilding-project.weebly.com); [www.gloucesterschools.com/eg](http://www.gloucesterschools.com/eg)) reveal a history of public meetings, including with parent and neighborhood groups; the selection of a consultant to do the feasibility and design analysis; results that include analysis of 14 options narrowed to nine to either renovate and expand or build new; a comprehensive rating of each option based on state requirements and the local educational program; and descriptions of the shortcomings of each of the two schools.

A project update, posted Aug. 16 on the committee's website, includes a "Summary of Facilities Deficiencies." Among the findings for East Gloucester:

- "The building envelope has visible deterioration, rust and rot, especially around windows, doors and vents."

- "...allows for the infiltration of air, water and pests."
- "Moisture infiltration is a concern as ground water is visible in the unvented basement area."

- "Teacher workspaces and copy areas are in the hallways."

It's not much better at Veteran's:

- "The exterior envelope of the building is in poor condition."

- "Much of the building is board and batten wood siding that has suffered from rot and deterioration ... metal frames of both of the windows and doors are rotting, leaving gaps for insects and pests to enter the building."

Yes, there are complex issues. What will be the cost to the city? How does the committee address neighborhood concerns, especially if the existing sites are to be used and the building or buildings expanded? What impact will a decision have on open spaces? What's the impact on transportation?

The School Building Committee seems mindful of these concerns. Its approach seems thorough and thoughtful, one guided by outside professionals who specialize in assessing needs and designing schools. And it needs some breathing room — and time — to reach a recommendation and make its case for whatever conclusion it reaches.

Gloucester kids, all of them, deserve a school environment that allows them, and their teachers, to focus on learning, using the best tools available, to help prepare them for the challenges they'll face in the coming years. What will it take? That's the issue.

*Carl Gustin is Gloucester resident who writes occasionally on national, regional and local issues.*