

Colburn School & the New Library



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*Dedicated to the memory of Westwood leaders and residents who
studied at Colburn School when it served our town's youth*

Cover illustration by Judith Ciardi

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Preface

I wrote most of this ebook after Westwood's Finance Commission met in February to discuss a new library. After that meeting, the commission voted 12-3 to recommend approval of a warrant to fund the library at the March 8 special town meeting. Over the past year or so, as the town mustered support for the project, I listened carefully to arguments in favor of the library. During that period, I was struck by the contrast between careful, reasoned plans for the library itself, and haphazard, strained, neglectful plans for Colburn school. At the commission hearing, the library board of trustees representative didn't want to talk about the school at all, and did so only under pressure.

At the special town meeting on March 8, 2010, another piece of this interesting puzzle fell into place. People who addressed the school at that meeting not only cared little for preserving the school – they regarded it as an actual nuisance. One person said that the school has nothing to do with the new library. Another person suggested that, given its age and the costs of keeping it up, the town would do best to tear it down. It can't. Westwood agreed with the Massachusetts Historical Society that it would not destroy the school.

No wonder then, that the town is willing to let the building deteriorate. If it's just a nuisance, move it off the building site to the back of the lot. Let it rot where we can't see it so well. Is that the majority judgment in Westwood? I can't be the only one who thinks we should try to save this building. The question of what to do with the school came up during our debates about the new library not only because it's the centerpiece of our historical district, but also because it's worthy of preservation, in itself. It's a handsome, useful building, and we can do good things with it. It is not a nuisance. If we treat it as a nuisance, though, it will certainly become one.

Decide Colburn School's Fate Now

The Finance Commission voted 12-3 this week to recommend passage of the tax override required to fund Westwood's proposed new library. I find myself wondering who opposed the measure, and whether their reasons for voting no are the same as mine.

The main reasons for opposing the measure are clear and well articulated. Taxes and public debt have increased again and again as we have made our way through the Great Recession. Here at home, the town mismanaged construction of the new high school, at great cost. Hopes for Westwood Station turned to disappointment as Dedham's Legacy Place flourished next door. Despite careful management of the town's resources in many areas, we find ourselves chronically short of money, even though taxes have risen faster than the rate of inflation in recent years.

Because of the chronic shortage, the proposed override for the library becomes one in a long series: we know more will come. When your tax bill increases by about two hundred dollars every few years, and you already pay \$400 per month, the prospect of more increases is discouraging. Raising taxes during a recession, when so many people already have to economize, is bad policy.

The arguments in favor of the new library are also well articulated. Tom Viti, the architects and the library board of trustees have assembled a strong set of plans. Attractive is the prospect of a new gathering place for our community, in the center of Westwood's historic district. If you have viewed the architect's sketches, you know that the new library building would add a lot to Westwood's sense of community. Its public space would augment our town and create new opportunities for social interaction among our citizens. It could bring a quiet retreat and a visually appealing space to our city center.

I say *could* bring because everything depends on disposition of the Colburn school. For library planners, the school is a nuisance that won't go away. It sits on the exact site of the proposed new library, and no one knows what to do with it. That's why Kevin McManus had to press so hard to raise the issue at the Finance Commission hearing on the library. The school has

become an embarrassment and an impediment. The closer we move toward approval of the library plans, the less we want to think about it. Current uncertainty about the school represents a huge, glaring weakness in the town's plans for a new library.

The plans are impressive for their good intentions, costliness and failure to face facts about the Colburn school. At a cost of \$180,000, the town wants to move the school a short distance to make way for the new library. Mothballed, it will sit on steel rails for the duration. When the new library is finished, Westwood plans to move the school again, this time to an undetermined location. The town estimates the total cost of this poor building's odyssey at about \$300,000.

The building is already an eyesore. Since the Westwood school district moved its administrative offices from the Colburn school to the new high school in 2005, the formerly handsome structure has gone to seed. I used to think how great it would look with a little fixing up. Now it's a sad wreck. It attracts the eye now because time, weather and neglect have made it ugly.

Does anyone think that the wear and tear on this poor wooden structure, Westwood's portable, homeless historical landmark, during the upcoming two to three years will do anything but make the building's condition much worse? Instead of allocating \$300,000 to fix the building up, we want to spend \$300,000 on the Colburn school road show, a punishing process to make the old building permanently unusable.

We've seen how rapidly the building has declined during the last five years. Who will want to rehabilitate it when it has suffered five more years of neglect, half of it sitting on steel rails? At the Finance Commission hearing, the library director indicated that the Board of Selectmen could decide to sell the building. Who would want to buy it? In 2012 it will have no land, no foundation, no prospective use, no physical attractiveness, diminished structural soundness, countless code violations, and virtually no economic value at all. It would have more value as firewood than as an historical landmark.

When the realities we won't face today sink in three or four years from now, this once fine, vibrant structure will reach the destination we have mapped out for it: an appointment with the

wrecking ball. We can't acknowledge that sad end during the library approval process, though. Residents would not approve the new building if it means destruction of the old. So we defer a decision about the Colburn school and hope that something will come up.

I have some ideas about how to make the Colburn school an attractive city landmark. I'm sure other residents have had similar ideas as we've watched the building deteriorate in our city center. If we have the vision to plan a new library, certainly we can muster the foresight required to make some reasonable plans for this handsome, well constructed example of Victorian architecture. It's not yet beyond saving, but chances are no one will want to save it after it has spent two years on the rails.

Remember that car that gave you so many good memories? You courted your spouse in it, went on family vacations in it. Put it up on blocks in the backyard for a year or two and then see how you feel about it. We are about to put the Colburn school up on blocks, and after that we'll consign it to the junkyard. Who will want to refurbish it in 2013, when we have a new library to occupy and operate? Even if the Board of Selectmen could find a buyer, where would the new owner put it? If we can't decide on a new location now, why would we think resolution of this difficult choice will arrive three years from now? It won't. We'll have the same problem in front of us, but with a broken down building that, for all its good memories, can't be brought back into useful service.

My concluding argument is simple. Make a decision now. Don't blow \$180,000 and more on a plan that leaves the Colburn school headed for destruction at the end of the road. If we want to preserve this old building, let's decide how we want to do it, now. We can't pretend or hope that this problem will get easier, or that the solution may appear through some serendipitous set of circumstances. Yes, serendipity does have a role in our lives, but it's not going to solve this one. This problem requires collective vision on the part of our community. We should bring that vision into focus now, before we approve construction of a new library. If we cannot make a decision, we should not approve the plans.



A Handsome Building in the City Center Deteriorates

Options for Colburn School

The Finance Commission held its first hearing on the proposed new library on February 8. At the hearing, members of the Finance Commission asked the library director, why can't we apply for the next round of funding, when the state covers 50% of the project cost, rather than only 30%? Tom Viti replied that the wait would be at least three years, with an uncertain outcome. Most critically, the wait would affect the library's ability to raise private donations for the project. People are reluctant to contribute when the project remains only on the drawing board, with ground breaking far in the future.

The same reasoning goes for the Colburn school. Who wants to donate funds for its preservation, when the town cannot decide what to do with it? A prospective donor has to ask, why has the town not faced this question? Because plans to restore the Colburn school with private donations would compete with fundraising for a new library? Because the problem is inherently difficult? Because library planners know that the chances of preservation are low, and the painful decision to raze the building is best deferred to keep plans for a new library on track?

A complete answer might include all three reasons. We have to press the town - that's us - on this issue. If we can't find the funds to return the Colburn school to usefulness now, how can we find the resources after a new library is built? Three or four years from now, the school will have deteriorated still further, every property owner will have to pay higher taxes to retire the bond for a new library, and we will have to support the increased cost of operating the new building as well. Who will want to donate money - or pay still higher taxes - for Colburn school restoration at that point?

Having pressed for a decision about the Colburn school sooner rather than later, let's take a systematic look at all the options open to the town. Four options are available under a plan that keeps the Colburn school in its current location. The second set of options, similar to the first, becomes available under plans that move the school from its current location.

Options available if the Colburn school remains in its present location:

- The current state: let it deteriorate indefinitely.
- Tear it down.
- Decide on a new use for the building and restore the building with that use in mind. For example, restore the school as an addition to the current library, giving our library the additional space it needs.
- Restore the building as an emblem of Westwood's history, to return it, as much as possible, to the way it appeared when it was new.

Options available if the Colburn school is moved from its present location:

- Move it once. Decide on a new location and move it. Then see options 1, 3, and 4 above.
- Move it twice. Move it a short distance to a temporary location while a new library is under construction. Select its ultimate location and move it there after a new library is completed. Then see options 1, 3, and 4 above.

In principle, *tear it down* could follow removal of the school to another location. But if destruction is the option the town selects, it is far more economical, if more painful, to tear it down in its current location than to tear it down after moving it.

Another way to analyze the future of the Colburn school is to decide whether or not to sell the building. If the town does not sell the school building, it's entirely responsible for deciding the school's fate. If it sells the building, it passes that responsibility to the new owner along with the bill of sale. It also assumes an obligation to help the new owner find a new location for the building. That obligation isn't part of a normal real estate transaction, but clearly, disposition of the Colburn school is not a normal real estate transaction. No individual or group will want to buy the school without a new location for it.

Use and location, location and use: those are the two variables that bedevil the town as it decides what to do about the Colburn school. Plans for a new library can't be reconciled with the school's current location, that's certain. To complicate matters, location and use are highly interdependent, and – in

Massachusetts especially – highly regulated. Most uses require a highly constrained set of locations, and most locations rule out all but one, or all but a few uses. The difficulties of this decision suggest that it won't become easier with time. Moreover, given the building's rapid rate of deterioration since it became empty, time is not on the Colburn school's side. In light of that, we should decide what to do with the school while the issue is in front of us, not later when the school's condition is even worse than it is today.

Here's a final note. You know I'd be sad to see this fine old building meet the wrecking ball this year. I wouldn't be the only one. That leaves two obvious options: use the building to expand the present library, or sell the building to someone who wants to preserve it. We have to guess that the library director and board of trustees considered the first alternative and rejected it. The advanced state of plans for a new building testifies to that. That leaves the option we'd like to defer because it has so much uncertainty associated with it. Selling the building under these circumstances creates a lot of questions and new tasks that we don't want to undertake right now. Yet a sizable number of people in Westwood would like to save and restore this fine old building, and within that number are individuals who would like to lead the way. Together, we should find those individuals and offer them our support.

Library Plan's Glaring Weakness

Your neighbors might ask you, how can you oppose this project, when we've been planning it for ten years? We've already invested a lot of money in these plans. I'd turn the question around and ask, how can we plan a new library for ten years, at such a high cost, and come up with a plan for Colburn school that's no better than this one? From the earliest proposal in 2000, we knew that a new library would affect the Colburn school. In 2004, a year before the school district administration moved their offices to the new high school, we knew the building would stand empty in 2005. So it has stood for nearly five years. We have had five years to decide what to do with this empty landmark; and this is the best we can do: mothball the building, put it on rails, move it again, and then decide what to do? That's not a plan - that's procrastination.

It's plainly procrastination to let a well constructed, historic building deteriorate for so long, then spend so much money on a plan that's not actually a plan. Everything about the building says, "Don't let me go downhill anymore. Please don't let this happen to me." Everything about the library directors' proposal says we don't know what to do with the building. We want to push the problem down the road to see if someone else can solve this nuisance for us. The proposal might not be so wasteful if we were not talking about \$300,000 in extra cost. The proposal might not be so insulting if we were not talking about a building that stood as Westwood's handsome historical symbol for so many decades.

Try to save this building from destruction.

What will we all say to future residents when they ask why it had to be torn down? What does it say about our town that we let this landmark go to rot while we busily plan a new building to take its place? Will we explain that we took it down because we couldn't figure out what to do with it? Let's not deceive ourselves. If we don't decide what to do with the Colburn school now, during this spring's decision process, we will see the inevitable result: Colburn school as a pile of scrap lumber to be trucked away from Westwood's city center.

A sure sign of procrastination is the library board's willingness to transfer responsibility for the Colburn school to the Board of Selectmen. Why should the Board of Selectmen be able to solve the problem – to market the building successfully – when the entire town failed to reach a decision on the issue for six years? The question does not belong to the Board of Selectmen. It belongs to the library directors and to all of Westwood's voters. The Board of Selectmen has plenty to do without marketing the Colburn school. If that's the school's intended destiny, let Westwood market the building now.

Here's an anecdote to illustrate what's actually happening here. At the Finance Commission hearing on the proposed library, the library board did not want to discuss the Colburn school. They did so only when commission member Kevin McManus made a pointed request that they address the question. The library director outlined plans for the school, and discussed efforts to preserve memories of the school's place in our town's heritage. To do that, the new library will contain a photographic display to document the school's history. That gave the game away. You don't need a photographic display to commemorate a well kept, vibrant and useful historical landmark. You need a photographic display to commemorate a building that fell victim to progress, a building we destroyed to make way for something new.

We don't have to follow this path, though. We don't have to view pictures of the school in a glass case. Westwood can preserve this building, the real thing – to appreciate the symbol of our town, not remember it in paper images. We just have to withhold our approval from a plan that relegates the school to more rot.

What will happen to the school if we approve this proposal? Here is a scenario that is altogether too likely. We'll remove the building from its foundation and place it on steel rails until the new library is finished. Before we move it a second time, we'll have the building inspected to see if it is structurally sound and safe to move. This inspection will be the first of many. We all know the inspection regime here in Massachusetts. Eventually it will fail one or more inspections: fire, electrical, plumbing, structural strength, overall safety. If it remains a public building, it

must meet handicapped access requirements and developing environmental standards. When the building's shortcomings are identified, we'll enter a long discussion that focuses on the cost of repairs, who should shoulder the costs, and to what purpose. The question of purpose returns us to the very one we can't figure out now: what do we want to use the building *for*?

The end of the discussion is predictable enough: the building will be judged unsafe. Once that assessment is made, the rest follows. Town officials sign the necessary forms, call the wrecking crew, give their final approval, and watch the building go down. The entire process follows standard procedures. No one is responsible for the outcome because the town has no choice – the building is unsafe. We'll say we did our very best to save the building, that age caught up with it. We truly tried, but the building became unsafe. What could we do?

If we adopt the current plan, then, we plan to spend \$300,000 to preserve the school rather than tear it down on the spot. That plan is evasive and therefore dishonest. If we can't solve the problem now, we certainly can't solve the problem five years from now, when the building has undergone so much punishment. If we can't raise \$500,000 to rehabilitate the building now, why should we have more success in five years, when rehabilitation will require twice that amount? Rather than spend \$300,000 to put the school on rails and move it twice, why not sell the building now and add the proceeds to the library fund? We can do better than this proposal. We can do better than pretend. Honestly.

Westwood residents don't want to see Colburn school torn down. Tax questions aside, most of us don't want to stand in the way of a new library either. We do want honesty in the library board's proposal for a new library. After the Westwood High School debacle, the board has taken care to act in good faith with the rest of its proposal. The proposal's not untruthful about the explicit elements of the project: its cost, its methods of funding, or its benefits. It's dishonest because it pretends that a \$300,000 plan to move the school (twice!) will save the structure for future town residents to enjoy. Anyone who looks at the building can see that it's nearly past saving. Every hot summer, cold winter,

and wet spring brings more deterioration, less will on our part to arrest the implacable process of weathering.

Do we want this new library so much that we're willing to consign this once-handsome building to the lumber heap? If the answer is yes, let's at least be honest about it. If the answer is no, if we don't want the new library to destroy the old school, let's decide how to preserve this landmark now. We've waited long enough to figure this one out. Vote no at the special town meeting on March 8. Vote no in the town election on April 27. Vote no and no again until we have a reasonable, honest plan for Westwood's central historical landmark.

Sandbagged

Here's a report from the front lines. On Monday, March 8, Westwood town residents met in the high school's main theater to discuss the Finance Commission's warrant to fund a new library, and to vote on the proposal. The Commission's warrant needed a two-thirds vote in favor to appear on the ballot for the town's April 27 election. "When it came time to vote," writes Ed Burns in Westwood's *Wicked Local*, "the chorus of 'Ayes' crushed the sprinkling of 'Nays'."

That language describes the atmosphere in the theater pretty well. Rather than permit the town to discuss the proposed library at length, library backers presented their case for almost an hour and a half. The presentation included details about how the town intends to finance the project. Since those details bear on the question of whether to issue a \$9.3 million bond to build a new library, that information belonged in the meeting.

When the architect smoothly presents images of mothers reading books as they cuddle their cute daughters, however, you know you're being sandbagged. That kind of marketing does *not* belong in a meeting intended to decide whether to approve a substantial, twenty-year bond to fund the project. At that point, the time for suave salesmanship is over.

After the ninety-minute pitch, moderator Tony Antonellis tried his best to give everyone a chance to talk. Several times, however, he reminded residents to economize on time, as if the meeting organizers had not squandered much of the discussion time with presentations clearly intended to close the case. That's democratic decision making? It didn't feel democratic and it didn't feel like a discussion. The unspoken message: we've discussed this question long enough. It's time to act.

In case that impolitic message didn't come through strongly enough, selectman Nancy Hyde took the floor at the end of the meeting. Her purpose wasn't to thank people for coming or to urge them to vote on April 27. Instead she pressed on the town the need to unite behind this proposal. Her manner of speaking

carried a not so subtle subtext to opponents: you've had your town meeting, now keep quiet.

Credit goes to library director Tom Viti, the library board of trustees and the Finance Commission for their openness about the project's financing. They have done their homework and have not fudged any figures. They know the town does not want another fiasco like the Westwood high school.

On the other side, the town's plans for the Colburn school are inexplicably weak. The plans are a sad case of trying to please all parties with a mixture of wasted money, procrastination and senseless effort. People who addressed this issue at the meeting largely dismissed the school's importance. One person even said that the Colburn school is irrelevant to plans for a new library, even though the old building sits squarely on the library's proposed site!

Kevin McManus, one of three Finance Commission members who voted against the proposal, summarized his arguments against. He highlighted the burden on homeowners who cannot afford another property tax increase, and unsettled plans for the Colburn school. Kevin McManus's arguments deserved more attention than they received. Instead the town meeting avoided a debate where library backers actually responded to viewpoints in opposition to theirs. You know the discussion is pro forma when the moderator repeatedly reminds you that time is short.

Instead, sensing that it had a majority, backers crowded the town meeting's agenda with one sales pitch after another, permitted somewhat perfunctory discussion, and rolled on to their vote of approval. Then the meeting ended on an ungracious note, where Nancy Hyde actually seemed to express impatience with people who have opposed the new library. This issue is not settled until we take a vote on election day. Voting yes because these plans have been ten years in the making is not a good reason to approve them. That's a sandbagger's reason for approval. Vote no on April 27.

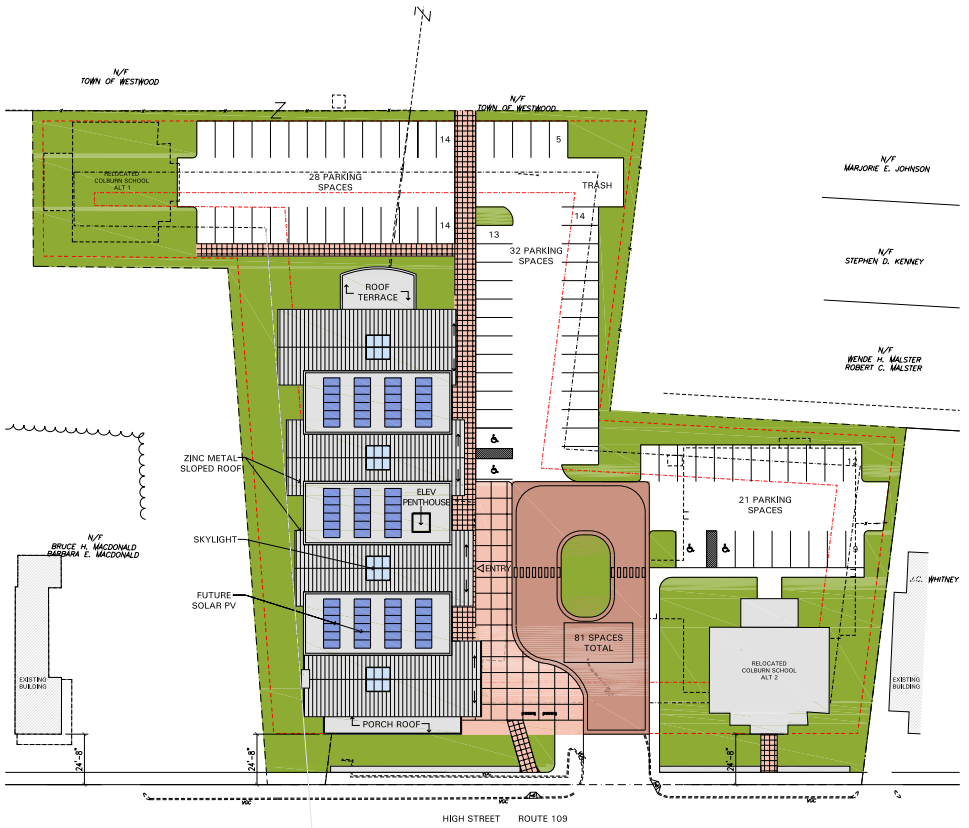
Site Plan

When I first heard about plans for the Colburn school – seems like a long time ago now – I had a hard time visualizing what they were talking about. I wasn't even sure what building they meant! When I saw the site plan on the next page, the relative positions of the various buildings came together. In the dance of elephants that occurs during constructions, five building positions matter:

- Current site of the library to be torn down.
- Future site of the library to be built
- Current site of Colburn school
- Site of Colburn school during construction
- Resting site of Colburn school when project is complete

The site plan does not outline the site of the current library. It does show the location of the proposed library and three Colburn school locations. During construction, the school would be moved to the rear of the construction site. After the new library is up and the old library is down, the Colburn school would be moved a second time, to a spot in front of the current library. The effect of this elaborate dance is that the library and the school switch places.

In the site plan, look for the school's interim location in the plan's upper left hand corner. The plan shows the school's final location in the lower right. During construction, while the library is at its interim location, it will sit on rails, without a foundation. When it reaches its final location, the Board of Selectmen plans to market the building to a party that can find a use for it. For more information about the school's future, please see the open letter that follows the drawing.




Site Study with Colburn

September 20, 2022

GRAPHIC SCALE



 Westwood Library

Finegold Alexander + Associates Inc
Architects

Site Plan with Colburn School's Interim and Final Locations

Note: To see the detail in this site plan, use your PDF reader to magnify the drawing.

Open Letter

Dear Board of Selectmen:

At February's Finance Commission hearing, I learned that Westwood had asked you to market the Colburn school after the new library is built. I thought, "Well that's interesting." You have a difficult task. The school is about to undergo more punishment after five years of sad deterioration. After Westwood moves the school twice and lets it sit unused for three more years, you may not be able to give the building away, let alone secure an offer from a serious buyer. If you act before the building undergoes such hard use, you may be able to find someone to take responsibility for the school.

I'm willing to take responsibility for it. I understand that responsibility in this case means ownership, with the costs and decisions that ownership entails. I'm not wealthy, but I do have an interest in finding a good use for this handsome building. It does not deserve the punishment and neglect currently planned for it.

To transfer responsibility for the school from the town to a Westwood resident, please consider this opportunity. I'd like to negotiate details of the transfer expeditiously, before construction of the new library begins. The more the library deteriorates, the more difficult it is to restore. If no one restores the building, no person or group can I find a new use for it. The town should act now and not wait. Seize this chance.

Sincerely yours,

Steven Greffenius