

**Butler New Playground Committee:
Responses to Questions and Concerns from the Butler Community**

Foreword: Below is all of the feedback we received from every “Community Input” opportunity between December and January. We have done our best to listen and respond accurately, succinctly, and respectfully. We invite you to read the questions, concerns, and responses below in the same fashion.

If you have additional feedback, please e-mail us at:
Mr. McAllister: mmcallister@belmont.k12.ma.us
Miller Design: diane@millerdesignllc.com

Thank you for taking the time to be involved in this process. Your involvement is essential!

I. New Playground Committee

1. Question: *What spurred this group to meet?*

Response: Last year Mr. McAllister sponsored several community input opportunities called "Stakeholder Interviews" as part of his entry into the new position. Each month had a different theme (e.g., Homework, Pick up and Drop Off, School Lunches, etc.) and the best attended meeting was "Playground Concerns." The creation of a new Butler playground committee originated from there.

2. Q: *What do we want to accomplish with the new playground?*

R: Our goal is to build a new playground that:

- meets current safety regulations
- provides a sustainable design
- addresses concerns about surfacing material
- offers educational value
- is handicap-accessible, and
- allows for a “community build” opportunity

Because significant concerns exist with other areas adjacent to the structure (including parking/traffic safety and congestion), the entire footprint of the school was also considered.

II. Reasons

3. Q: *I do not know why change is necessary. What drives this?*

R: The new playground initiative actually began several years ago under Bruce MacDonald to address safety concerns with the playground. In the Spring of 2006, a certified playground consultant observed the structure and determined it had 5-7 years of life remaining. Over time, cracks in the wood continue to expand, causing decay/gaps, exposed bolts and screws, and splintered wood. At that time, Coralie DiTommaso organized efforts to maintain/repair these safety issues. But almost five years later, it is time to consider replacement. Understanding that a new playground is not something that is implemented quickly, we are doing our best to prepare for when the structure is no longer usable, rather than just waiting for that day to arrive.

4. Q: *What problem is trying to be fixed with the playground equipment? Is it unsafe? Old? Not educationally sound? Not “modern” enough?*

R: Please see Q3. It is all of these. Wooden structures have a life expectancy of approximately 20 years; our structure is 19 years old.

5. Q: *Has the existing equipment been evaluated by a trained professional; can we have a copy of that report?*

R: The structure has not been evaluated in any formal capacity, as doing so would mandate the immediate remediation of all violations. It has been informally evaluated by certified playground safety inspector and falls short of several regulations currently in place.

6. Q: *Can any of the existing equipment be kept? If so, for how long?*

R: Yes. Our hope is to re-use as much of the structure as possible, but we will need a contractor to advise us further on that concept.

7. Q: *Why it is not feasible to repair what we have?*
Q: *What is the cost if we choose to do nothing?*

R: In the short run, it is feasible and that is what we are doing. We spend \$500-\$1000 in annual repair costs (plus a potential \$8,000 of new pea stone and railroad ties surrounding the space). In the long run, it is not feasible to repair the structure indefinitely.

8. Q: *People need to know that there is a reasonable and viable “used car” option! I feel like we are only being told that we have to buy a new car and that is the only option worth exploring.*

R: At each of our community input meetings we presented two options to proactively address the concerns of the current structure: Option A (which keeps the current layout and simply swaps in new equipment) and Option B (which includes redesigning the layout, a natural play area, safer traffic flow, and increased staff parking). While we did not specifically mention a “used car” option, “Option A” could be considered such.

III. Cost and Fundraising

9. Q: *What are the costs, life expectancies, and maintenance costs for each proposed piece of equipment and subsurface?*

R: Without a final design and specific materials decided upon, this is a difficult question to answer. However, we can state clearly that this is one of the major considerations that will be considered when choosing materials and equipment.

10. Q: *With the town’s financial issues being what they are, is now really the right time to be spending money on a new playground?*

R: Safety is driving our initiative, more than economics. The fact is that there is probably never a good time to spend a lot of money on a new playground. It is important to remember that we are not expecting the town to pay for a new Butler playground, since most of the town’s residents will never use it. It is our expectation that it will be privately funded and none of the money will come from town tax revenue.

11. Q: *Other than from Butler Parents, where will the money come from? How will this amount of money be raised?*

R: The fundraising group, lead by Jane Fox, is planning on a multi-tiered fundraising strategy including businesses, foundation grants and scholarships, and individual contributions.

12. Q: *How much of this money is going to come from the Butler Community? How much of this money is going to come from other sources?*

R: It is our expectation that *most* of the money will not come from Butler families and *none* of the money will come from town tax revenue.

13. Concern: *We ought to put careful consideration into how we spend the PTA's money. This is especially true given the budget shortfall.*

R: The Butler PTA paid \$5800 and BEDP paid \$3000 for construction documents and services from Miller Design. Whether the PTA contributes any additional money to the actual equipment is up to all PTA members, but they are under no obligation to pay any more money moving forward, as this is not a PTA sponsored activity but a Butler Community project.

14. C: *The proposals are somewhat extreme given the fiscal climate -- the PTA should narrow its focus on improving the structure and perhaps the play area around the structure; in any case, more attention should be paid to realistically keeping down the bottom line.*

R: The PTA can contribute to the project as they deem acceptable, but they are not required to. No bottom line amount has been specified to date, but we are actively searching for ways to reduce costs to make them as manageable as possible. For example, the idea of a "community built" structure can help save \$8,400 to \$14,300 (depending on the company and the complexity of the equipment). The overall fiscal climate will, indeed, dictate the success or failure of this initiative if we are able to privately fundraise the total amount.

15. C: *[Money] for a parking lot should NOT come from our PTA. In a town where our schools are completely underfunded, I do NOT want to see us pay for something that is the responsibility of the town.*

R: Please see Q13.

IV. Parking Lot Concerns

16. Q: *What is the purview of this committee? I thought it was just playground equipment, not the parking lot, etc.*

R: Because significant concerns exist with other areas adjacent to the structure, the entire footprint of the school was discussed. Our primary focus has been on the equipment, but no change is made in isolation. Economically speaking, changes made to the parking would be cheaper if conducted *in collaboration* with the modification of the playground.

17. Q: *Is a new parking lot really necessary?*

R: Butler has approximately 44 staff and 29 parking spaces, forcing staff to park in the middle of the lot three and four cars deep. Staff park on the street and, like any car, get ticketed. The result of more staff having to park on the street is fewer available spaces for community members.

18. Q: *How much will the parking lot cost?*

R: The estimate for a new parking space is \$30,000.

19. Q: *Has the teacher's union advocated for additional parking?*

R: No.

20. Q: *It seems like this has been advertised as a playground improvement. Isn't the inclusion of a new parking lot a bit of a "scope creep"?*

C: *I am concerned that the working group is taking on the "insufficient staff parking issue" under the scope of getting a new structure - it feels a little like "sneak scope" to me.*

R: We consider the playground to be the *entire* lot and such an inclusion seems to be within the purview of the Playground Committee. From the time of our initial presentation to the PTA requesting funding for the initial plans, our interest was in getting Miller design to look at both the structure *and* the adjacent space.

21. Q: *Why should money that is intended to be for the kids' playground be funneled into building a new parking lot? Who is going to give their money to a new parking lot?*

R: The options presented attempts to deal with ongoing issues. Ultimately, the community will determine whether they want to fund an increase to the size of the lot or not.

22. Q: *Why should the PTA pay for a parking lot? Isn't that kind of thing the town's responsibility?*

R: Please see Q10 and 11. The PTA is under no obligation to pay any more money moving forward as this is not a PTA-sponsored activity but a Butler Community project.

23. Q: *What about expanding parking on the Sycamore Street side of the school?*

R: As a committee, we considered this. According to the Belmont Police, Sycamore Street is probably not wide enough to add parking spaces to. Parking is limited to the residential side of the street to ensure that emergency vehicles can pass. Mr. McAllister is currently working with the Selectmen, Town Manager, and Police to determine changes to Sycamore Street that will increase safety for all community members, including adding sidewalks and using some of that fenced-in lawn space differently. As that is a more long-term conversation with a longer time frame, street expansion and on-street parking proposals were not included as a part of the Miller Design layouts.

24. Q: *Can we get a pull in/drop off lane on Sycamore St.?*

R: Please see Q23. This area is part of an ongoing discussion with the town.

25. Q: *How about adding angle parking on the Sycamore St. side of the school? We never use that side of the school and we could get 12-13 spaces over there.*

R: Please see Q23. This area is part of an ongoing discussion with the town.

26. Q: *Can the parking lot be moved to the T-ball space? Then the playground could be where the parking lot is now...this would increase the safety and beauty of the school.*

R: As a committee, we considered this. This option was discussed but considering the larger cost, larger loss of field space, and traffic logistics it caused by increasing more cars onto Maple Terrace, it was not a feasible option.

27. Q: *Could we create some 45 degree pull-in spots along Maple St with "Staff Parking Only 8am-4pm" signs? This would require that the wall on along the sidewalk be removed and replaced by a fence, moved back several yards.*

R: Please see Q26.

28. Q: *What about changing White Street parking so that during school hours it can be reserved for teachers only. That way we would not need to expand the lot.*

R: As a committee, we considered this. Residents rely on those parking spaces, too, and their needs should be included in the discussion as well. That was one of the proposals submitted to the Selectmen, Town Manager, and Police by Mr. McAllister.

29. Q: *Why can't we add the possibility of a drop-off zone on White Street? The drop-off area in front of the school could be lengthened several hundred yards up White Street which could work very well if the lot was moved to the back of the school (preventing the need for a driveway/entrance to the parking lot from White Street).*

R: Please see Q26. However, this was *not* one of the proposals submitted as it would have the effect of further reducing the amount of available on street parking on White Street for everyone.

30. C: *The design presented will decrease precious on-street parking on White St., making it even harder for parents to find a place to park.*

R: We considered this as a committee and determined that it was not necessarily true, as moving the entrance into the staff lot would decrease it in one area but increase it in another. However, this is exactly the type of challenge we faced with every change proposed; no change is made in isolation, and it is important to understand the unintended consequences. The cost-benefit analysis is what is important.

31. C: *The insufficient staff parking issue is a real problem - but it should not be solved in passing under another project, nor solely under the auspices of the Butler PTA: it requires town and school department involvement (and much broader community input, of course).*

R: Please see Q21.

32. C: *Under the staff expansion plan, the swings get moved to the field - thus reducing the play space further.*

R: Under any plan, the swings will need to be moved. They are currently in violation of regulations ensuring a safe distance between children swinging and children running by (The fall zone for an 8' high swing is 16' in front and 16' behind).

V. Gathering Community Feedback

33. Q: *I have a neighbor who will have children at Butler in the future. She did not know about the meeting, so she did not attend it. How can she be involved?*

R: All design options will continue to be posted online for additional community input. If they have additional input please feel free to e-mail:
Mr. McAllister: mmcallister@belmont.k12.ma.us
Miller Design: diane@millerdesignllc.com

34. Q: *How will a *final* design be determined? Who will decide what goes in to the design?*

R: The final design will be determined by Miller Design and the playground committee based on the input from the various meetings with the community, teachers and BEDP staff. It will be everyone's best thinking that delivers the final product.

35. Q: *How have you guys collected feedback?*

R: We held five separate "Community Input" opportunities polling different stakeholders: Neighbors, Parents, Teachers, BEDP staff. At each of these opportunities stakeholders had the chance to ask questions, input written feedback, and "vote" (using dots). Design options were also posted online and respondents provided feedback via e-mail.

36. C: *I would recommend using SurveyMonkey.com, or another polling tool, to send out a brief questionnaire to the community gauging the level of commitment (i.e. how much money people think is reasonable). After witnessing how other school projects have ballooned in cost in other districts, it might make sense to ensure the support is there.*

R: We are considering this via the school list-serv.

37. C: *Community input meetings were not well advertised and were poorly attended. In addition, the meetings were not conducive to active community input; ideas that were shared were immediately discounted.*

R: Community input meetings were advertised in several ways: the list-serv (4x), newsletter (3x), school flyer, the Belmont Media Center, and word-of-mouth. Looking ahead, if you have suggestions on how the meetings can be more conducive to active community input please let us know. At the end of the day, we addressed the feedback to the best of our ability.

38. C: *The lack of attendance may indicate there is not much support for the project.*

R: We share this concern. Other factors – such as the weather and other town events scheduled for the same date – also contributed to the lower turnout. We will continue to inform the community. Ultimately, our ability to raise money (or not) will be the truest indicator of support.

VI. Design Options, Features, and Equipment

39. Q: *With all new structures of equipment for ages 5-12 years, will there be any limitations of items per age (like now with the monorails and monkey bars being limited until 1st Grade)? This doesn't seem fair.*

R: All equipment will be safe for children ages 5-12 based on the national safety standards.

40. C: *Losing the shade and play area is a big concern.*

R: It is not our intent to remove the shade trees that are already in place on the playground. However, there are large sections of the playground that are not covered by shade from those trees, especially in the warm months at mid-day when children are outside playing. We anticipate looking into private funding sources that would fund shade projects – this could include a shade structure or shade plantings. The actual method of shade has yet to be determined.

41. C: *Lighting needs to happen. Too much vandalism is happening now. It could be motion lighting or whatever but it needs to be well lit.*

R: We are taking site lighting into consideration. We will also take into consideration the neighboring properties as we locate and position the potential lighting.

42. C: *I think the proposed site plan is a vast improvement – the safety of separating entry and exit from the parking entry and exit is significant.*

R: We agree.

43. C: *The PTA was told we would have 3 designs to consider. The community input meetings only gave 1 new option.*

Q: *Why was only one site design presented at the parent meetings? I heard there were several designs made, so why weren't all of them presented together?*

R: Two site designs were presented per the contract with Miller Design. As was requested by the playground committee, one site design involved keeping the parking in its current location and the second involved expanding the parking. There were four equipment options as well as numerous additional playground concepts presented for input.

44. Q: *What about the green space? In a town like Belmont where there is so little open green space already shouldn't we be preserving every inch of green space we have?*

R: The parking expansion design would reduce the field next to the playground by approximately 56 feet, but increase the large field by approximately 40 feet (assuming the garden is relocated). Among other designs considered, this represented the smallest loss of lawn space.

45. C: *I am concerned that age-appropriate playground equipment was not presented in the plans or the consideration for the increasing number of children with special needs who will be attending Butler in the future to be able to maneuver and play on.*

R: All equipment presented is ASTM F1487-07 certified for ages 5-12, which means that it meets national safety standards for that age group. As for special needs, all equipment will be ADA compliant.

46. C: *The "climbing" structures that were presented to replace current aging wooden one did not represent structures that create interactive social engagement between children. Has anyone had concrete input from the Physical Therapists and Occupational Therapists that work with children in schools for equipment needs in an outdoor natural setting?*

R: Interactive social engagement is a priority for the playground and will be incorporated through the final climber and/or additional playground features.

47. Q: *Has anyone been to the Butler playground on a Saturday morning? Do you know what the population is out there playing on weekends, in the summer, in the late evenings? Although infants and young children are not the current population at the school, they are your future population and they come to sit in swings while their siblings run around and their parents take a break on a bench on a Saturday morning.*

R: Our committee is made up of parents, all of whom have taken their children to the playground on Saturdays. We plan to add infant swings as the ones that are out there currently.

48. C: *I urge you to watch*

http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/southernafrika904/video_index.html which gives a 20 minute story from PBS Frontline about the good intentions people do have and what can go terribly wrong with the implementation and the finished product when it comes to Kid-Energy powered play equipment. I do not think Butler needs to be First in the country to “try” this, nor do we have the finances to experiment with.

R: There are several fundamental differences between Playpumps (the company discussed in the report) and the product we are proposing. They are two different companies entirely with two different management styles, histories, etc. Empower playgrounds’ history is much more thoughtful and careful and slow-growing, with a tremendous amount of energy invested in R&D and literally years of pilot testing before just rolling out thousands of essentially untested products like Playpumps did. The equipment that we are considering will be produced in the states through a partnership with a much larger, well established playground equipment company (Playworld Systems) with state-of-the-art manufacturing and materials and an excellent reputation for quality products backed up by warranties. The fundamental problem with the Playpump product seemed to be the engineering of the water pump itself and our merry go round is not intended to pump water, so it is a very different product. While the same notion of harnessing the energy of kids at play is shared by both companies, the companies themselves and the products they offer are completely different.

49. Q: *Is fire truck access required from White Street to the basketball courts?*

R: No, since it is not currently accessible.

50. Q: *Why pay for shade structures that will need maintenance and add large cost to the project when we have beautiful trees already in place?*

R: Please see Q41.

51. C: *I cannot support any plan that reduces the open play space to allow for asphalt and more cars.*

R: Please see Q45.

VII. Miller Design

52. Q: *In the past I was told that the reason we had to have the pebbles was that there were drainage issues. Has Miller Design considered the drainage issues and do they have a plan to fix them before anything is changed?*

R: We are considering alternative surfacing for multiple reasons, only one of which is the fact that the pebbles tend to wash away. All of the proposed surfacing options include

standard drainage detailing and specifications. Miller Design is not a civil engineering firm and is not contracted to provide more holistic infrastructure designs.

53. Q: *Does the current contract with Miller Design including preparing a final design that is approved by the town regulators – or will that involve additional fees?*

R: The contract with Miller Design includes creating a schematic design and corresponding renderings for marketing purposes. The intention is for the construction documents to be finalized for an additional fee, once sufficient construction funds have been raised, which may be in a few years. Miller Design spoke with the Community Development Office about the project at the design onset in November.

54. Q: *Is there a Miller family connection to the Playworld Systems' Matt Miller that is marketing the merry-go-round?*

R: No.

VIII. Approval Process

55. Q: *Can the committee get input from the town/school regulatory bodies to assure that the final design will be viable--incorporating all the necessary regulations. The committee and Miller Design should be operating within the guidelines and parameters town and school committee will allow.*

R: Miller Design spoke with the Community Development Office about the project at the design onset in November to understand the regulations and logistics that needed to be considered.

56. C: *We need to have multiple &/or modular designs for the approval process.*

R: Miller Design has presented multiple designs and is now entering a phase of the project where they will be concentrating our efforts on one design that *best* responds to the parameters and preferences of everyone involved. The final design will be determined by Miller Design and the playground committee based on the input from the various meetings with the community, teachers and BEDP staff. It will be everyone's best thinking that delivers the final product.