

September 15, 2015

**Report of the Ad Hoc Committee to Study
the Re-Use of the Former Fitch School**

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History

The first buildings of what is commonly referred to as the Waltham Watch Factory were erected on Crescent Street in 1851, and expanded over several years. Eventually, across Crescent Street from the factory site, the three blocks between Maple and Brown Streets were developed as landscaped parks with lawns, trees, plantings, walking paths, and a bandstand. These were privately owned and maintained by the owners of the factory for the benefit of their employees and the community. The park in the center block, between Ash and Cherry Streets, was acquired by the city and in 1931 the Ezra C. Fitch elementary school was erected. The two parks on either side of the school property were eventually converted to parking lots.

In 1975 a classroom wing and gymnasium were added to the original building. In 2004 the school was closed and its students reassigned to the new Stanley School and the Whittemore School. During the next few years the building was used as a “swing school” during the final phases of the city’s school building program. As of 2008 the building was no longer used except for storage.

In February 2010, the southwest corner of the property, where a wading pool had been located since the 1970’s, and operated in summer under the jurisdiction of the Parks and Recreation Board, was divided and declared surplus by the School Committee in response to a request by the Director of Recreation and the Ward Councillor. This allowed a spray park to be developed in place of the wading pool, which could no longer be operated because it did not meet health and safety requirements.

Re-Use Process

In June 2011 the School Committee declared the property surplus to school needs, and it was transferred to the general inventory of the city. In September 2011, the City Council appointed an ad hoc committee to study the disposition and re-use of the building. Neighborhood meetings, a site view, and several meetings of the committee were held to assess various aspects of the property in consultation with boards and departments, and to discuss Request for Proposal (RFP) and Request for Interest (RFI) procedures.

RFI

A Request for Interest was developed and issued (April/May 2012) by Purchasing Agent Joe Pedulla. In June 2012, the committee reviewed the 4 responses that met the RFI criteria:

- Berkeley Investments – *25 market rate apartments*
- L.D. Russo, Inc. – *Affordable rental apartments (# of units not specified)*
- MetroWest Collab Development – *34 affordable rental units (proposal required a city contribution of \$1.1 Million)*
- Crescent Suites Hotel – *60 room hotel with restaurant*

The committee voted to recommend to the Council that an RFP for hotel use, the use most amenable to the Mayor, be prepared. However, the recommendation was tabled because the Mayor recommended that Fitch was to be included in a study to assess police headquarter locations. The matter was recommitted to the ad hoc committee. The police headquarters assessment concluded that the Fitch School was not a feasible site for a police headquarters.

The Ward Councillor expressed concerns about the hotel use after conversations with area residents. Parking is severely restricted on the site, and a hotel use would likely require the addition of parking levels to meet requirements. The neighbors had adamantly opposed a parking garage on the adjacent Cherry Street lot initially proposed by the Watch Factory developers, and subsequently removed from their plans.

With the exception of the two Watch Factory parking lots, the area east of Crescent Street consists primarily of single and multi-family homes. A hotel, while classified as a residential use, is also a commercial enterprise, and the Ward Councillor was concerned that a hotel business in that location would alter the character of activity within the residential neighborhood to its detriment.

School Committee Space Allocation study

In March 2013, the School Committee sent a letter advising the City Council that increases in student enrollment are expected to continue for the next decade, and that a committee reviewing the larger facility needs of the district had identified the former Fitch School property as a logical building to address these needs.

In December 2013, the city engaged a consultant to evaluate 6 elementary schools, 2 middle schools and the high school, with an option to evaluate other city-owned properties, with regard to projected facility and program needs. Fitch was listed in the RFP as an example of “other city-owned properties” that might be studied under that option. That study is currently underway.

School Committee December 17, 2014 vote

At their December 17, 2014 meeting the School Committee voted to inform the City Council that the School Committee will no longer consider the Fitch School building for any type of educational site for the Waltham Public Schools.

Social Service Agency Interest

In September 2013, the Executive Director of GWArc expressed interest in the Fitch property on behalf of the organization. GWArc is a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides educational, occupational and other services for children, adolescents and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

GWArc currently occupies, as it has for many years, a city-owned property on Chestnut Street. GWArc representatives were permitted a site visit at the Fitch property, and they remain interested. Their proposed use would be similar to the former school use in that it would be Monday-Friday daytime hours, with low parking demand.

Proposed Park Use

At the April 6, 2015 meeting of the Committee, the Ward Councillor proposed a park use for the property. His reasoning included the facts that the south side of the city is its most densely populated, has a low per capita amount of open and recreational space, and very little land available for creating such amenities. This shortcoming is highlighted in the city's current Open Space and Recreation Plan, and Community Development Plan. Recommendations in those plans include purchasing space to create pocket parks in these neighborhoods. Another point presented in support of the park use is the historical fact that the Fitch School property, in addition to the current parking lots north and south of it, was formerly park space, owned by the Watch Factory, but intended for public use. It consisted of open, landscaped lawns with mature trees, paved walkways, and a bandstand.

Committee members expressed support for the idea. The Ward Councillor did not want to put it to a vote until he had a meeting with neighbors to hear their opinions on the park idea.

At a neighborhood meeting in May, and in subsequent messages to the Ward Councillor, there was mixed response to the park concept from constituents. Some, including a direct abutter, were strongly in favor, believing it would be a valuable asset to the neighborhood. Others were opposed, citing concerns about the park becoming a hang-out for undesirables, causing it to become a liability for the neighborhood.

2015 RFPs

At approximately the same time the park concept was proposed in Committee, the Mayor directed the Purchasing Agent to issue 2 RFPs: one for leasing the property

and one for purchasing it. The Ward Councillor informed neighbors of the RFP process which was not complete at the time of the meeting.

Two responses met the requirements for the RFP: one for purchase of the property to develop a hotel (which is allowed in the zone but requires a special permit from the City Council), and one for leasing the property from GWARC (see "Social Service Agency" above). The Mayor's RFP Evaluation Committee subsequently recommended that the purchase RFP was most advantageous for the City.

The Ward Councillor has received many unfavorable comments from neighbors regarding the proposed hotel use, and no comments in favor of it. (Also see comments above in "RFI" section regarding hotel use). The Ward Councillor has also received recent comments from neighbors supportive of GWARC's proposed use. Such neighborhood support had also been expressed prior to the RFP process.

Ad-Hoc Committee Recommendations

The committee recommends the following uses for the former Fitch School property as appropriate and acceptable:

- Public school
- Municipal office, including school administrative offices
- Non-profit social service agency that provides educational, occupational or recreational services to a target population, and operates in a similar manner to a school.
- Public recreation

The committee further recommends:

- The city retain ownership of the property, and offer it for lease 'as is', which lease agreement must be satisfactorily in place within a reasonable amount of time, such as 2 years from the date of this report.
- Any use be designed to preserve, expand or improve the recreational uses currently located on the site (playground, hard court games, children's play structures), that those recreational amenities continue to be shared for public use, and that opportunities be taken to reconfigure the preserved or expanded recreational uses to communicate appropriately with the adjacent spray park.
- Proposed repairs or improvements to the exterior façade of the original building should be subject to the approval of the Historical Commission.
- Any parking area continue be available for public use during declared snow emergencies.

-----End of Ad Hoc Committee Report-----

Council rule pertaining to reports of Special Committee

RULE 79 When a written report of a special council committee which has City Council members serving as members of that Committee is presented to the City Council, the Chairperson and/or any of the Council members of the committee shall be entitled to speak for a total of ten (10) minutes, for the purpose of explaining the report of the committee. No debate shall take place at this time.

Copies of the report shall be furnished to all members of the Council at least twenty-four hours in advance.

An equal amount of time (maximum of ten (10) minutes) subject to the same limitations contained in this rule shall be allotted for the presentation of the written minority report, if any.

Addenda:

- A. 3/18/13 letter from School Committee to City Council
- B. 12/18/14 memo from the School Committee to the Mayor
- C. Facility Overview (page 4) from RFI
- D. Building Features (page 11) from RFI
- E. Neighborhood view (page 12) from RFI
- F. Footprint (page 13 from RFI)
- G. Floor plans (pages, 14, 15, 16) from RFI