

Repurposing vacant schools for affordable housing program

Pursuant to RIGL § 45-53-10 the Department of Housing presents interim updates on implementation of the repurposing vacant schools for affordable housing program. The statute establishes a program to provide guidance and assistance in the repurposing of vacant and unused school buildings. The Department of Housing is committed to pursuing all viable avenues to affordable housing development in Rhode Island and views this as an important opportunity to partner with other state agencies and municipalities in that pursuit.

Even in advance of regulations for the program being promulgated by the RI Department of Education and assessments being conducted prior to the statutory deadline, the Department offers this preliminary report with a list of vacant schools identified by the Department of Education, updates on progress regarding assessments to be conducted through the program, and some preliminary observations that have emerged to date.

Progress regarding 2023 Vacant Schools

The 2023 Vacant Schools list identified 13 schools. There were proactive steps being taken at the municipal level to redevelop 5 of these into housing developments. These projects will create more than 300 new units of housing across the state with 72 of those units identified as being affordable housing. The other schools identified on the list were under contract for non-housing use, had been slated for demolition or were determined to have limiting factors for housing such as a deed restriction.

Shown in Attachment 3 is the study conducted by the Department on South Road Elementary in 2023. This assessment was conducted with information provided by the Town of South Kingstown and utilized a feasibility template shared with the task force enumerated in statute. Department staff toured the school, reviewed site information provided by the Town, and completed the attached assessment. This assessment also produced information about the cost to redevelop the property. High level estimates conclude that the property would be costly to remediate from hazardous materials and install necessary infrastructure including septic systems, and access to the public water supply. Because the structure itself is not conducive for direct redevelopment, cost will vary significantly based upon the number of units proposed at the site.

Due to this initial collaborative process, the Town Council decided to authorize funds to hire a consultant to evaluate the former South Road Elementary School (SRES) for affordable housing development. Union Studio was selected to undertake the study and over the past several months have begun to develop schematic buildout concepts, meet with community stakeholders, and bring back information to the Town Council to determine next steps in the process. The Town expects to present the findings of the study in December/January. It is crucial to note that Union Studio did not recommend reusing the existing building structure for housing due to the building's age, layout and overall condition. The new build concepts presented by Union Studio offer opportunity to meet community goals while increasing affordable housing density. The Town does anticipate seeking ways to partner with both State and non-profit agencies to move forward in the process and construct affordable housing at the SRES site.

2024 Vacant Schools Identified

The Department received a list from the RI Department of Education (please see Attachment 1) of 11 schools that have been abandoned or are no longer being used by a school district. The RI Department of Education report did not identify any schools that are anticipated to become vacant.

Assessment strategy for 2024 Vacant Schools

The Statute requires that the Department of Housing consult with the following partners to conduct an assessment of identified properties within 150 days of receiving the list of schools:

- The Department of Health;
- The Department of Environmental Management;
- RI Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation;
- Rhode Island Fire Marshal;
- Local zoning official; and
- Local planning official.

The Department of Housing will continue to initiate conversations with the state agency partners to develop and begin the work around conducting the vacant school assessments. Initial steps for conducting preliminary assessments have begun including conducting desktop reviews to identify whether the sites meet statutory requirements for proceeding with the evaluation and consulting with local officials to determine the status of the property.

The Department of Housing will be collaborating with the task force partners to continue the process of conducting preliminary site assessments and identifying site-specific conditions. The Department anticipates that the preliminary assessments will include high-level information regarding the cost of redeveloping schools into housing, as well as some site-specific factors that will impact the cost. These include identification of known structural issues (e.g., status of roof or major building systems), potential environmental conditions, review of relevant deed restrictions, etc.

This year, as a follow-up to the preliminary assessments, the Department of Housing has contracted with a local architecture firm, Signal Works, to perform feasibility studies on properties that may be well suited to adaptive reuse for housing. We anticipate using this contract to conduct studies on identified vacant schools that do not yet have redevelopment plans in place. This study will provide a high-level overview of what an adaptive reuse project on the proposed site would entail. This includes, site plans, conceptual floor plans, energy modeling, and an order of magnitude cost assessment.

Preliminary observations

In the interim, the Department of Housing reached out to the following school districts to receive updates, discuss next steps, and if necessary, schedule site visits for the purpose of assessing the schools:

1. Coventry
2. Newport
3. North Kingstown
4. Portsmouth
5. Providence
6. South Kingstown
7. West Greenwich

Of the 11 schools transmitted by RIDE, there are proactive steps being taken at the municipal level to redevelop some of these into housing developments.

Here are preliminary observations and information regarding the status of each of the schools identified:

School identified	Preliminary observations
Coventry , Oak Haven School 46 Pettine Street	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Currently vacant for school use but actively used for storage and planning space- School is owned 85% by the school department- No plans for development as of yet- Will be included in A&E feasibility study contract
Newport , Coggeshall Elementary School 133 Van Zandt Avenue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Under Contract with developer- 32 units, 26 in the School Building and an additional 6 units in new construction on the school property- There will be a variety of unit sizes, 1, 2 and 3 bedrooms.
North Kingstown , Wickford Elementary School 99 Phillips Street	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Under agreement with developer, working on tax credit and CRMC processes
Portsmouth , Coggeshall School (former Aquid. Island Christian Academy) 321 East Main Road	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- 7.54 Acre Parcel - with 2 baseballs fields which are actively used- No plans for development as of yet- Will be included in A&E feasibility study contract
Providence , Carl Lauro	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- RFP posted for redevelopment
Providence , Feinstein at Broad Street	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Charter schools have expressed interest in use of building- No plans for development as of yet
Providence , West Broadway	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Still in use as school- Will eventually be vacated
Providence , Gilbert Stuart	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Slated for site of new K-8 school
South Kingstown , Wakefield Elementary School 101 High Street	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Architecture firm contracted for study of property
South Kingston , Curtis Corner Middle School 301 Curtis Corner Road	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Property slated for demolition for plans of a new athletic facility
West Greenwich , The Greene School Building 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- As of June 30, 2024 this building was vacant and has since been demolished

94 John Potter Road, West Greenwich	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modularity procured prior to the start of the school year to give us 2 additional classrooms to use. - As part of the 5-year capital improvement plan school plans to build a new building with 2 classrooms and a cafeteria space.
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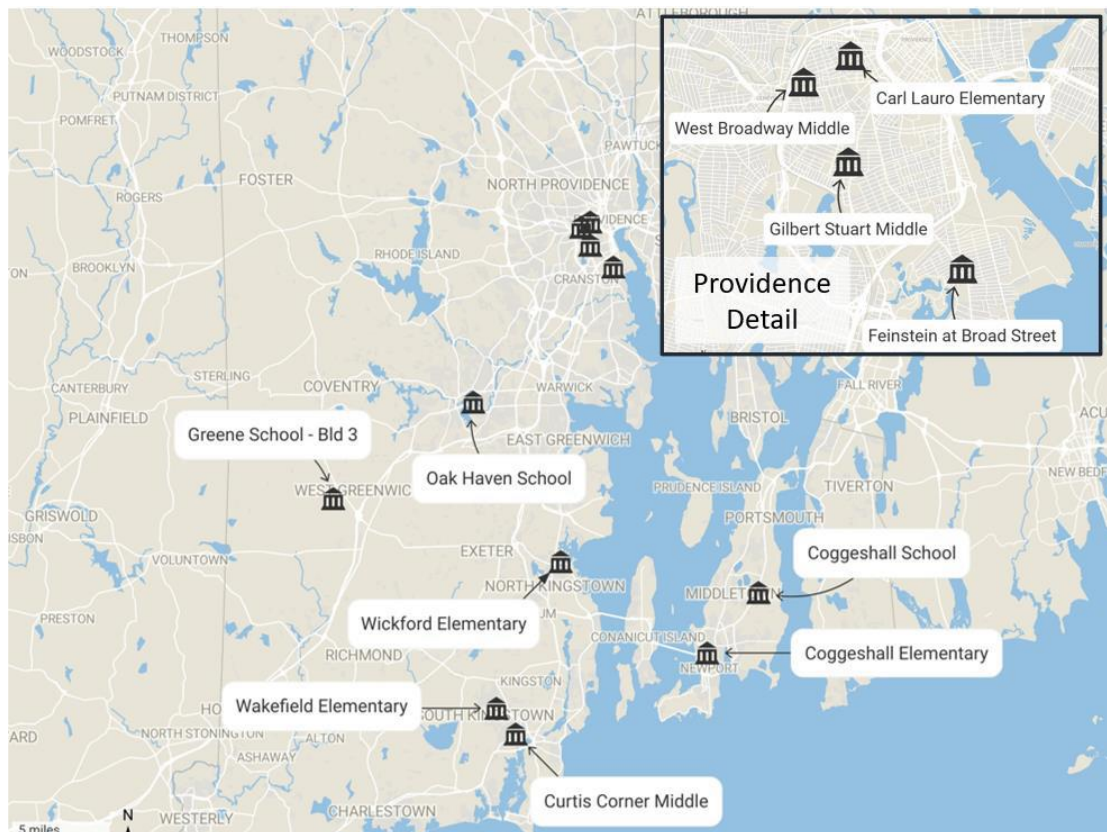


Figure 1: Map of vacant schools provided by the Rhode Island Department of Education (October, 2024)

Through the process of engaging municipalities, school districts, and the task force partners, one theme that has emerged is that in addition to taking the important first step of assessing feasibility and cost of converting schools, securing funding will also be a key precondition for achieving the goal of converting schools to affordable housing. While there is not a dedicated source of funding for converting schools into housing in Rhode Island, we continue to partner with state and municipal partners to identify potential sources and secure additional funding for these purposes.

Attachment 1:

The Rhode Island Department of Education provided the following report to the Department of Housing in October of 2024.

Vacant School Building Report – October 1, 2024 Pursuant to R.I.G.L. 45-53-10(c)

The following information was collected from school and municipal officials as part of the annual Housing Aid submission.

- *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools reporting vacant/unused school building as of July 1, 2024:*
 - Coventry
 - Oak Haven School, 46 Pettine Street
 - Newport
 - Coggeshall Elementary School, 133 Van Zandt Avenue
 - North Kingstown
 - Wickford Elementary School, 99 Phillips Street
 - Portsmouth
 - Coggeshall School (former Aquid. Island Christian Academy), 321 East Main Road
 - Providence
 - Carl Lauro
 - Feinstein at Broad Street
 - West Broadway
 - Gilbert Stuart
 - South Kingstown
 - Wakefield Elementary School, 101 High Street
 - Curtis Corner Middle School, 301 Curtis Corner Road
 - The Greene School
 - Building 3, 94 John Potter Road, West Greenwich
- *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools reporting no vacant/unused school buildings as of July 1, 2024:*
 - Barrington
 - Bristol-Warren
 - Burrillville
 - Central Falls
 - Chariho
 - Cranston
 - Cumberland
 - East Greenwich
 - East Providence
 - Exeter-West Greenwich
 - Foster
 - Foster-Glocester
 - Glocester

- Jamestown
 - Johnston
 - Lincoln
 - Little Compton
 - Middletown
 - Narragansett
 - New Shoreham
 - North Providence
 - North Smithfield
 - Pawtucket
 - Scituate
 - Smithfield
 - Tiverton
 - Warwick
 - West Warwick
 - Westerly
 - Woonsocket
 - Achievement First
 - Apprenticeship Exploration School
 - Beacon Charter School
 - Blackstone Academy
 - Blackstone Valley Prep
 - Charette Charter School
 - Compass School
 - Excel Academy
 - Highlander Charter School
 - Hope Academy
 - Kingston Hill Academy
 - Learning Community
 - Nowell Academy
 - Nuestro Mundo Charter School
 - Providence Preparatory Charter School
 - RI Nurses Institute
 - RISE Prep Mayoral Academy
 - Times2 Charter School
 - Village Green Virtual Charter School
- *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools reporting buildings that are currently in use which they anticipate will be vacant/unused by December 31, 2024:*
 - none
 - *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools that did not respond:*
 - International Charter School
 - Paul Cuffee School
 - Segue Institute for Learning
 - Southside Elementary Charter School
 - Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts

Attachment 2:
Supplementary Updates Provided by Municipalities

The Department of Housing contacted relevant municipalities to receive an update on the listed properties and determine next steps. All municipalities have provided an initial update for this report but, additional details will be provided in the next report and in the assessments as they are conducted. For the majority of properties identified, the municipalities are already taking action towards redevelopment or demolition.

Newport - Coggeshall Elementary School: The adaptive reuse and redevelopment of the Coggeshall school building and site is part of a broader Newport City Council effort to increase housing availability in the city. In February of 2023, the City Council approved a Resolution which stated the “City of Newport is facing an unprecedented housing crisis,” and it identified the Coggeshall School as an underutilized city-owned property that “may be suitable for the development of much needed housing;”. The building was constructed in 1899 and formerly used as an elementary school. Due to declining enrollment, the school was closed in 2013, and the building and parcels were turned over to the city and they have remained unused in the decade since. The city issued a request for proposals for reuse of the school, which prioritized the creation of work-force housing. A potential developer has been selected, with a proposal to develop 32 dwelling units, with a mix of one, two and three bedroom units. And all with rents within the workforce housing range. The city is currently conducting public outreach regarding the selected proposal and two neighborhood meetings have been held. We’re looking forward to the reuse of the school as housing, saving an historic building and helping with the City’s housing needs.

South Kingstown - Wakefield Elementary School: This elementary school facility has still not been officially turned over to the town. The schools ceased use of the facility in 2023 and is still in the process of being turned over to the town. Union Studio was engaged to evaluate the WES site for reuse as affordable housing like SRES. Once again, Union Studio did not recommend reuse of the structure but did develop several options for housing development on the site. The town expects the findings of Union Studio in December or January and at that point the Town Council will provide further direction on how they wish to proceed. The town does note that there has been some push back on the use of the WES site for affordable housing with competing agendas for open space and business development. They anticipate the final decision will be made by the town-council in the new year.

South Kingstown - Curtis Corner Middle School: This facility is not expected to be turned over to the town. This year a \$150M bond referendum passed for the construction of a new high school and associated athletic facility. There are plans in process to take down the CCMS building and redevelop the site into an athletic complex to support the SK High School athletics program. The site would therefore remain under care, custody and control of the School District. The town expects the CCMS building to be demolished sometime next year at which point the new athletic facility can be constructed.

Attachment 3:

South Road Elementary School Site Assessment, February 202

South Road Elementary School: Site Information

1157 South Road, South Kingstown, RI 02879

SOUTH ROAD SCHOOL: SITE INFORMATION		
GENERAL PROPERTY INFORMATION		
Item	Information	Comments
Plat/ Lot	39-3/20	Includes South Road School, Admin Building, Curits Corner Middle School
Deed Status	Unrestricted	Per UTR Review – There are no restrictions in the deed. Each parcel was sold for consideration and were not gifted to the town, so there is no issue regarding RIGL 45-2-6. The council can dispose of this land as it sees fit.
Deed Book/ Page	0092/0279 & 0088/0395	Land acquired by the Town in 1961 and 1963.
Property ID (PID)	2751	
Address	301 Curtis Corner Road	
Total Lot Area	50.78 Acres	Includes South Road School, Administration Building, and Curtis Corner Middle School.
Sellable Upland Area (SRS)	7-14 Acres +/-	Land covering the current South Road School footprint and surrounding upland areas. Potential property for sale.
Gross Building Area	33,445 SF	South Road School only.
Year Original Structure Was Built	1961	
Year of Last Renovation	1990	Addition added in 1990.
Currently Heated?		
Electricity On?	Yes	
ASSESSMENT INFORMATION		
Item	Value	Comments
Building Only	\$4,458,300.00	Replacement cost valued at \$6M +/- . Value for SRS building only.
Land Valuation (Total Land Area)	\$3,692,800.00	Total valuation for 50.78 Ac. Town estimate of 7 acres of developable land.
Land Valuation per Acre	\$72,721.00	Cost per acre based on total land value. Appraisal is required for land to be disposed.
ZONING INFORMATION		

Item	Information	Comments
Zoning District	Government Institution (GI)	District restricted to government or health care uses.
Permitted Uses	Health Care Institution, Governmental purposes	Pursuant to Section 101 - Zoning Districts - Any significant use of land in the areas shown within this district for proprietary purposes or uses by nongovernmental entities, other than health care institutions, shall require rezoning to an appropriate zoning district.
Highest/ Best Uses	Varies	Schools, recreation center or similar in existing building or rezone to residential R10 with possible high density buildout with cottage regulations
UTILITY INFORMATION		
Utility	Vendor	Comments
Water	Kingstown Water District	Serviced by KFD. CCMS serviced by United Water District.
Sewer/ Septic	Septic / OWTS - Requires Replacement	The septic system has failed. Tanks needed to be pumped every few months when the building was being used by Meadowbrook and during the testing/vaccination period. Tank holds 10,000 gallons.
BUILDING CONDITION		
Item	Information	Comments
Roof	Repairs needed	One leak currently. Age of roof currently unknown.
Known Hazardous Materials	Asbestos	Pipe insulation in janitorial closet and in restrooms. Pipe wrapping in girls restroom in older section of the building. Additional exploration required.
Cameral Systems	Not operational	FOB electronic lock system for access and the building is alarmed. The camera system is non-operational and would cost thousands to make it work.
Boilers	Operational. Upgrades needed.	Two boilers. Large boiler for the main building was installed in 1990 when the addition was added. It runs good on natural gas. The six circulators are of varied age, but the heat piping and valves are original to the building.

		The small natural gas boiler in the 1990's addition runs fine also. The piping is original to the addition.
HVAC	Partial Air Conditioning	There is partial air conditioning in the building which is provided by mini splits. Only certain classrooms have it because of the special needs children that needed condition space.
Windows		
Facade		
STRUCTURE CONVERSION		
<i>Positioning of indoor walls – are walls aligned with unit development or do indoor walls need to be reconfigured?</i> Interior walls are largely in a uniform order and could be used as delineating walls between units.		
<i>Are there major structural conditions that would need to be changed ahead of a conversion (example – gymnasium space conversion)?</i> Large central cafeteria could be converted or used as common space.		
<i>Is there plumbing already routed to classrooms? Or would extensive new plumbing be required?</i> Plumbing, including sanitary lines, would need to be newly run.		
<i>What would be required to create unit level heating/AC? Is the current system easily convertible?</i> Individual unit electric heat pumps would most likely be the most efficient way to heat and cool the space. There is currently heating to each classroom via boilers and overhead ducts but not every classroom has cooling.		
<i>Are there currently any deed restrictions on the property? If so, describe the restrictions.</i> N/A		
CURRENT USE		
<i>Description of Building's Current Use:</i> Town currently uses the building for furniture storage and a workshop. EMS has several items in the building as well as the SKSD. Highway uses a room for excess tire storage and the police department uses a room for their community outreach items i.e., coolers, grills, patrol bikes and the like.		

Site Preparation Cost Analysis

The current site, identified as Plat 39 Lot 3 on the Tax Assessor's plat maps and as 1157 South R, South Kingstown located on a large parcel, 50.78 acres with other uses on it to the rear or east of the property (see attached sketch). The town plans to annex approximately 7 acres of the 50+ acres to be used as the subject site.

The building is no longer used as a school and the Town of South Kingstown is moving forward in a process to raze the school and convert the land into affordable workforce residential use.

The town has commissioned and received a *Limited Hazardous Building Materials Survey* of the improvements on the site, with an effective date of January 3rd of 2024. Preliminarily it is estimated that it would cost approximately \$100K to \$200K to remove and dispose of the hazardous materials on site, however a quote from a licensed vendor is not currently available. The town is currently seeking quotes for the removal and disposal of the hazardous materials as outlined in the report.

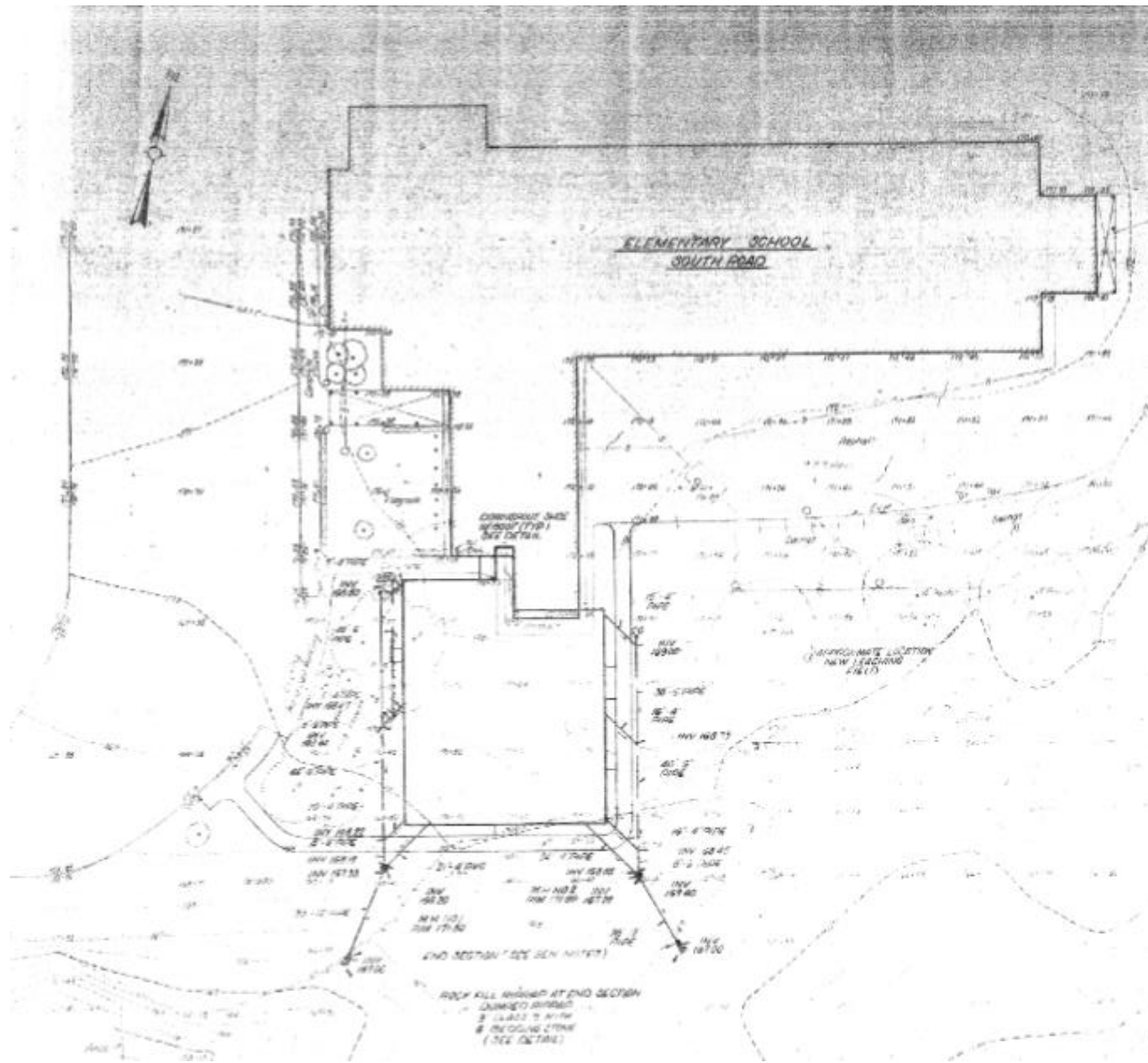
The cost to raze the school and foundation, and dispose of the construction debris is preliminarily estimated to cost approximately \$500,000 to \$1M.

The cost to build an on site septic system is dependent upon the number of units proposed for the site, the range of costs is preliminarily estimated to be \$300K to \$700K dollars, inclusive of engineering and permitting. Water table tests and absorption rate testing will also impact the cost to construct an on site system.

Public water is currently available to the site and school building, but it is likely the size will have to be increased to accommodate an unknown number of units and its current pipe condition is unknown, along with the pipe material used. It is preliminarily estimated that the cost would range from \$10K to 35K.

All estimates provided are based upon limited information and an unknown proposed project. The proposed number of units, finishes, and affordability considerations will significantly alter these estimates and the cost of a new structure.

South Road School Site Map



Site Photos





South Road Elementary School Lot – Looking South towards Curtis Corner Rd: February, 2024



South Road Elementary School classroom: February, 2024