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Watertown's Elementary School Projects to Finish Months Ahead of Schedule

By **Charlie Breitrose** | February 25, 2021

(<http://watertown-ma.gov/charter>)



Recent photos of the construction at Hosmer (left) and Cunniff elementary schools.

The construction of the new Cunniff and Hosmer elementary schools will be completed several months ahead of schedule.

Students at Cunniff are projected to move into their new school three months early. At Hosmer, children and staff will return seven months early, with the entire project scheduled to be completed a year early, said Vivian Varbedian from owner's project manager firm Hill International.

The School Building Committee received the news last week, and it was shared with the Town Council on Tuesday night.

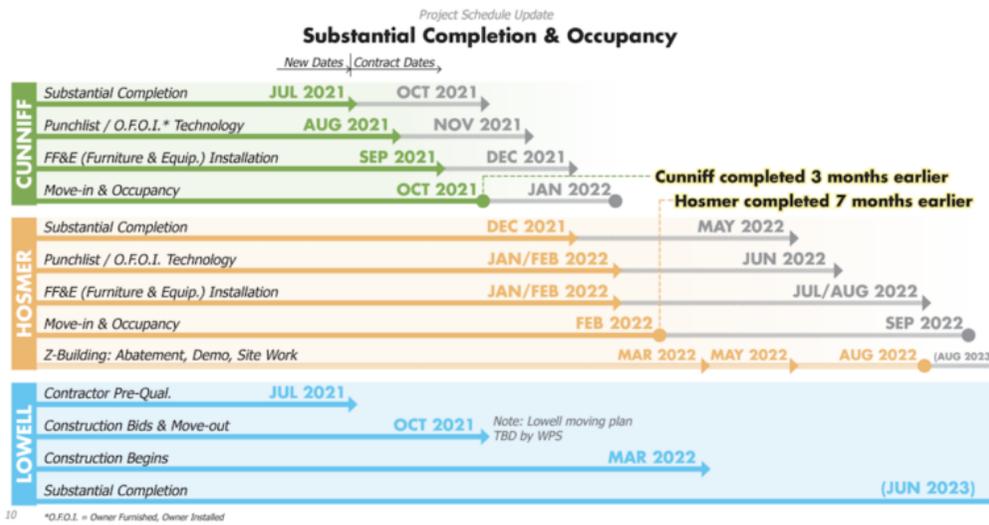
Hill worked with the contractors, Brait Builders Co., to complete the abatement of hazardous materials and demolition of the old buildings early, Varbedian said. The erection of the steel structures was also accelerated.

Superintendent Dede Galdston expressed the appreciation on behalf of the Watertown Public Schools.

"The thought of having students in these amazing learning environments so much earlier gives us such great hope for next year, for what things will look like across the board," Galdston said.

Town Council President Mark Sideris said he was "very, very excited" when he first heard the news of the early completion dates. It is good for both students and those living near the schools.

"To have kids go back to school in 2022, with all the site work done, way ahead of schedule — the neighbors will be very happy we will be getting out of their hair earlier," Sideris said.



Originally, the move-in date for Cunniff was January 2022, but that has been pushed up to October 2021 in the new schedule, Varbedian said. At Hosmer, the move-in date was moved from September 2022 to February 2022.

Students at Hosmer are currently all attending class in the “Z”-shaped building, which was part of the old school. They will move out of that building and into the new one when it is completed. The school’s fields are being used as part of the construction site, too, so they must be restored.

The demolition of the Z-shaped building, including abatement of asbestos and other materials, and the restoration of the fields had originally been scheduled to finish in August 2023. In the new schedule it will be completed in August 2022.

The construction of Lowell still remains scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2023, Varbedian said. The school will be completely renovated inside, and have some additions, including a new library/media center.

The construction process at Lowell is expected to start over the summer with the pre-qualification of contractors. Then bids would be taken and students and staff would move out by October 2021. Construction would begin in March 2022.

Reaction

Sideris thanked the owner’s project manager, Hill International, the architects, Ai3, and the contractors, Brait Builders. He also thanked his colleagues on the School Building Committee, which oversees the project, and the Town Council and Town Manager Michael Driscoll for approving the \$170 million budget for the three elementary schools.

“I think this is a great team effort. The school building committee kept everyone’s feet to the fire,” Sideris said. “I want to thank everyone on the committee and the neighborhoods for putting up with it.”

He added that the decision to build new schools, rather than to renovate the old ones, also helped expedite the construction. School Committee Chairman John Portz thanked everyone who was part of making the projects a success, and added. “keep this going when we get to the high school. I’ll put that out there.”

Paul Anastasi, a School Building Committee member, meets regularly with the project managers and the contractors. He said he has been part of conversations at the construction trailers on the two school sites, and he thanked his “trailer buddies.”

“That spirited conversation goes back and forth across the trailer table each week,” Anastasi said. “Thank you, Tom (Finnegan of Hill International) and Daren (Sawyer of Ai3), you guys in your group, for putting this together to get us to this point.”

Town Council Vice President Vincent Piccirilli said that the project is not only expected to be completed early, but will be under budget. In May 2020, Watertown officials learned the bids came in several million dollars below the \$100,000 million cost estimate (<https://www.watertownmanews.com/2020/05/14/bids-on-elementary-school-projects-under-budget-but-covid-19-creates-additional-costs/>).

“This is obviously fantastic news. Those of us in public office often take a beating for never being able to get a project done on-budget and on-time,” Piccirilli said. “The idea that when we went to bid this job for these two schools they came in under our budget and now they are actually going to be done significantly ahead schedule speaks to professionalism of everyone.”

Committee Member Leaving

The Feb. 17 meeting was also the final one for Lori Kabel, who was hired as Watertown’s first Director of Public Facilities in September 2017. In that position, she oversaw both Town and school buildings.

Several members of the School Building Committee thanked Kabel for her work. Varbedian noted that she helped the school projects move along by coordinating the moves out of the old schools, and the renovations of the temporary spaces for students during construction: the St. Jude’s School in Waltham for Cunniff students, and the Z-shaped building at Hosmer.

Kabel recalled how just days after she began working in Watertown the Massachusetts School Building Authority officials were touring the high school to see if it qualified for the program. And, at one of her first School Building Committee meetings they hired an architect to design the schools.

“To walk away was not an easy decision,” Kabel said. “I left blood, sweat and tears in Watertown. It will always be a piece of me.”

She added that she hopes Watertown officials invite her back to see the elementary schools, and the high school, when they are finished.z
