

[October 18, 2022]

# Decas Community Center Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Decas School Steering Committee was formed by a town vote at the Wareham Fall 2021 Town Meeting to draft and present a feasibility study to the town on the potential municipal uses of the former Decas Elementary School located at 760 Main Street. The Steering Committee was appointed in January of 2022 for a term set to expire at the Fall 2022 Town Meeting on October 24, 2022. The Steering Committee worked to develop a plan to convert the school building into a multi-generational community center with a wide portfolio of services to offer to the town. Keeping the town's financial condition in mind, the Steering Committee developed a funding model via rental income that would eliminate or minimize any revenue or outlay impacts to the town budget. The Steering Committee also hired Jones Payne to perform an architectural assessment of the building to determine the site suitability and identify any outstanding issues that would need to be resolved. Lastly, the Steering Committee commissioned a town survey to gauge support for the proposal and to identify benefits to the town and what services might do the most good for the community. **The Decas Steering Committee recommends that the town move forward with the plans outlined in the Decas Steering Committee Final Report.**

## Architectural Assessment

Jones Payne Architects and Planners, Inc. was hired to perform an architectural assessment and determine 1) if the Decas Elementary School property was sufficient to operate as a community center, 2) identify potential room uses and develop a floor plan and property map, and 3) identify necessary upgrades or problems for the community center and develop a prioritized timeline for recommended mitigation of those issues. The final report from Jones Payne was delivered to the Steering Committee in August with several key findings:

1. **The Decas Elementary School is immediately feasible as a community center with no significant upfront costs.**
2. **Asbestos remediation was completed according to the AHREA guidelines in 2017 during the roof replacement and no further asbestos remediation is necessary unless construction or deterioration were to disturb the remaining asbestos.**
3. **Building infrastructure including heating, bathrooms, and building accessibility are sufficient today with no or minor updates required.**
4. **The cost to build a similar building today would be between \$65MM and \$75MM**
5. **The building is naturally cool and on the hottest days of the year the hottest inside temperature measured in the building was 84 degrees.**



Figure 1 - Notional Floor Plan

Full details including room data sheets evaluating individual room categories, floor plan, property maps, and detailed evaluation materials are available in the complete report.

## Financial Planning

The Steering Committee approached the proposal with an intent to minimize or eliminate the cost to the town. Central to this was the strategy to be as efficient as possible with operating costs while raising substantial funds via lease agreements with non-profit organizations, community organizations, and other sources of income. An estimated budget was developed using historical expense data from the school department with labor estimates for building maintenance and operation.

Budget Forecasts	
Heating	\$50,193.36
Electrical	\$47,633.63
Water	\$4,304.23
Sewer	\$13,667.18
Annual Safety Inspections	\$1,000.00
Trash Removal	\$2,000.00
Cleaning Services	\$30,000.00
Facilities Operation Manager	\$90,000.00 inclusive of benefits package
Building Maintenance Allowance	\$30,000.00
<b>Expense Subtotal</b>	<b>\$397,616.81</b>
<b>Expense per square foot</b>	<b>\$5.23 per square foot</b>
Available Rental Space	Appx 27,000 square feet
Regional Average Commercial Rent Rate	\$16 per square foot per year
<b>Income Potential (Rate X Sqft)</b>	<b>\$432,000 per year</b>
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>\$34,394</b>

*Figure 2 - Operational Budget Overview*

The building expense of \$397,616.81 was evaluated against other towns in the areas that operate community centers and was found to be around the average cost to the towns. The rental rate of \$16.00 per square foot per year was developed by studying current commercial real estate listings with the input of a commercial real estate agent from Jack Conway Realty in Boston. Based on the building floor plan, approximately 27,000 square feet of 62,000 total would be made available to

rent for a total income potential of \$432,000 a year, resulting in a net to the town of \$34,394 for capital improvements to the building. This value does not include any other sources of income, but the Steering Committee did evaluate some other options:

1. Solar canopy leasing could generate \$40,000 a year similar to the Upper Cape Regional Technical School
2. Federal and State grant opportunities through CDBG, ARPA funds, etc. The Steering Committee reached out to state and federal representatives to discuss options. Several Massachusetts towns and cities considered the same thing including Springfield, Cambridge, and Fitchburg.
3. Local fundraising by donations, fund drives, and other charitable activities

To understand the demand for such an operating model, the Steering Committee solicited interested parties to submit letter of interest and come before the Steering Committee in a standing agenda item. To date, the Steering Committee received 7 letters from several organizations of varying sizes including the South Shore Community Action Council, Gateway ABA, Wareham Tigers Athletic Association, and others. Since the Steering Committee lacked the statutory authority to issue official RFPs our outreach was limited to organizations that had expressed interest independently and no organization was solicited by the Steering Committee. **The Steering Committee believes that a formal RFP issuance will allow more interested parties to respond and fill out the remaining rental space at the Community Center.**

## Community Survey

As part of the effort to better understand where the community stood on the idea and to solicit additional feedback on a portfolio for the proposed community center. The survey was available through the town website and printed copies handed out at community events during the response period of late June and July of 2022. We received 354 responses total, two of which were paper responses that showed overwhelming support for the Decas Community Center.

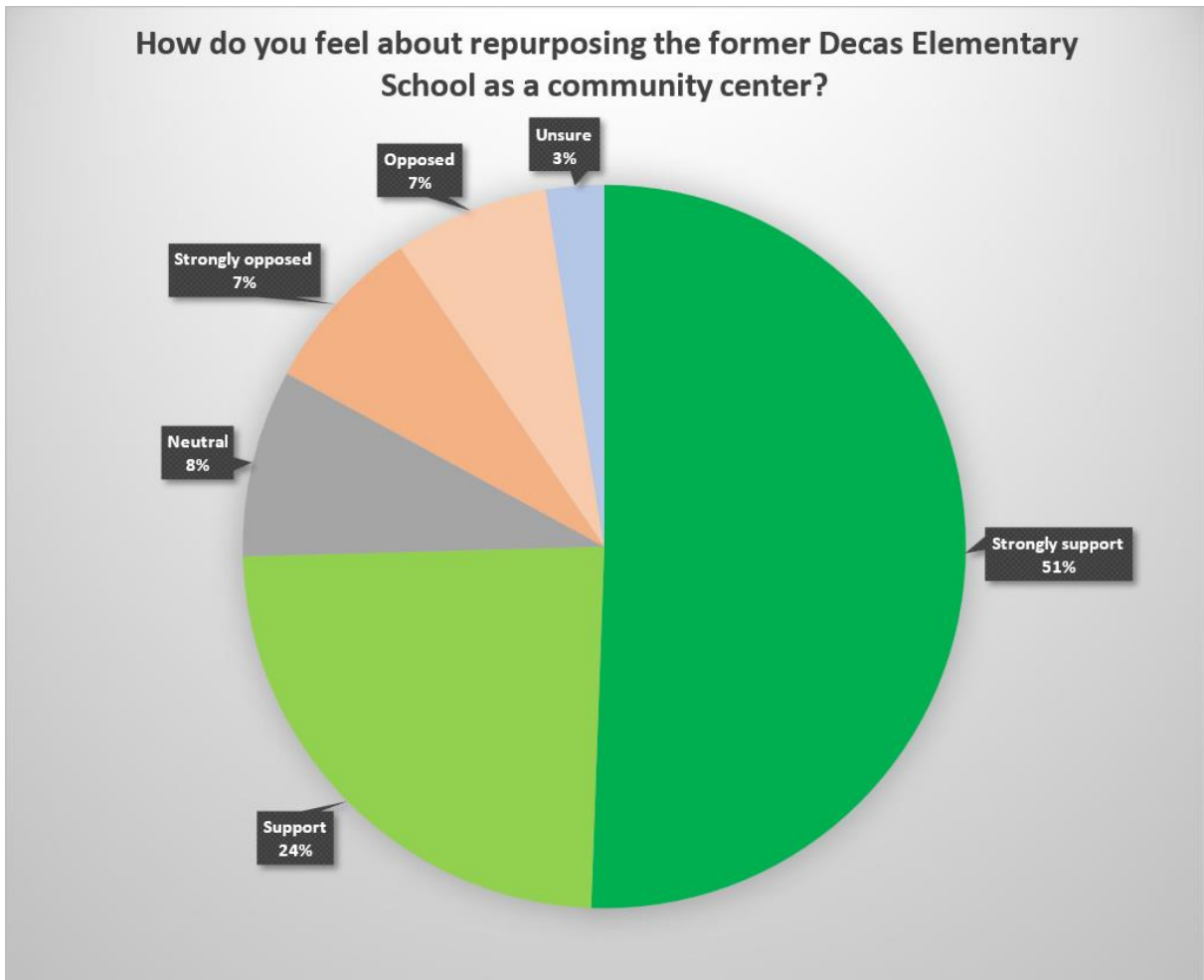


Figure 3 - Response Breakdown for Support Question

The survey also asked respondents to identify what services and activities might be most interesting and useful to the town. The responses illustrated that adult education, Council on Aging, the playgrounds and fields, social community events (e.g. Community potluck), and cooking classes were the most popular activities that would be part of the Decas Community Center.

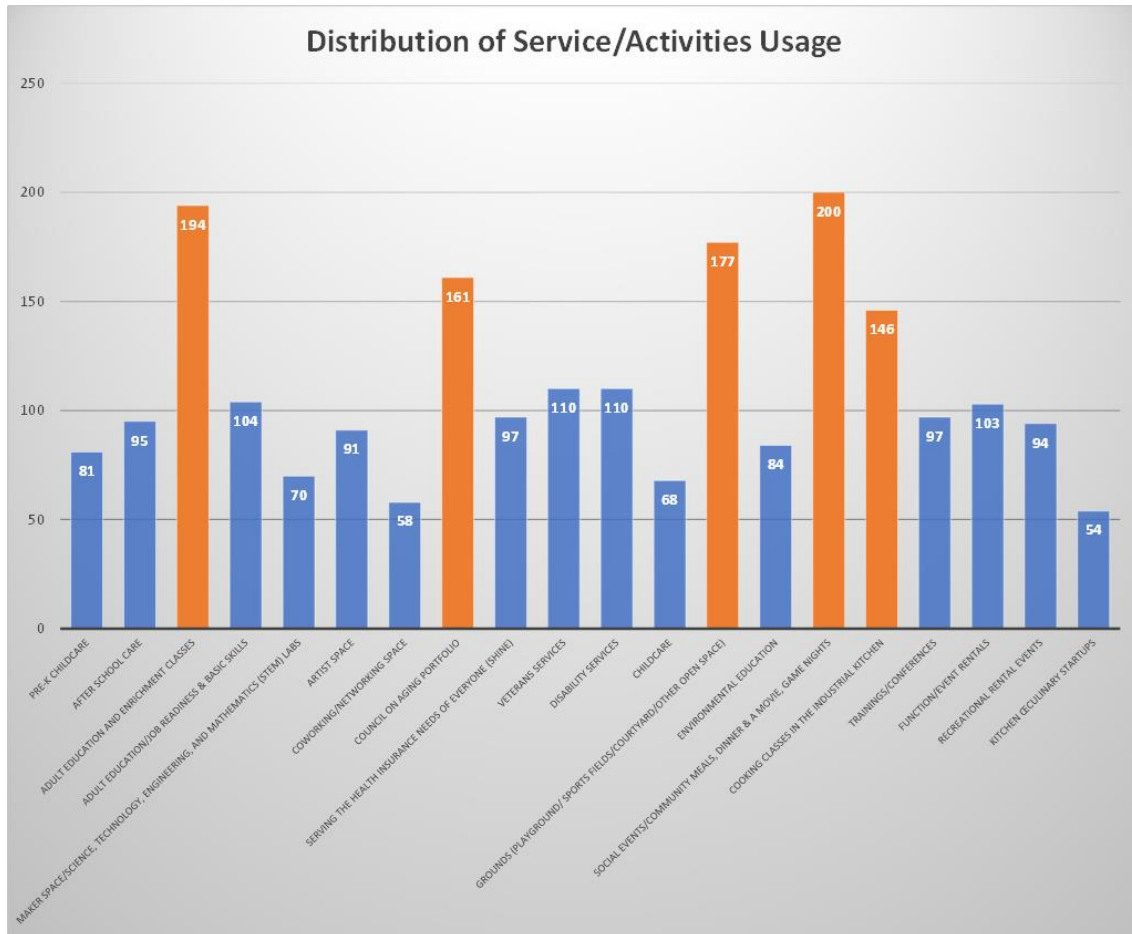


Figure 4 - Distribution of Services/Activities

The survey was also designed to understand the social needs of the town and whether an expansion of non-profit and social service organizations would positively impact the town. The results showed that the respondents were about evenly split about sufficient child/elder care although more respondents said they did not have sufficient childcare. Respondents also reported that they do experience issues with accessing services through things like transportation problems, long waits, and backlogs. The expansion of social services via leasing to such organizations would positively impact these families directly.

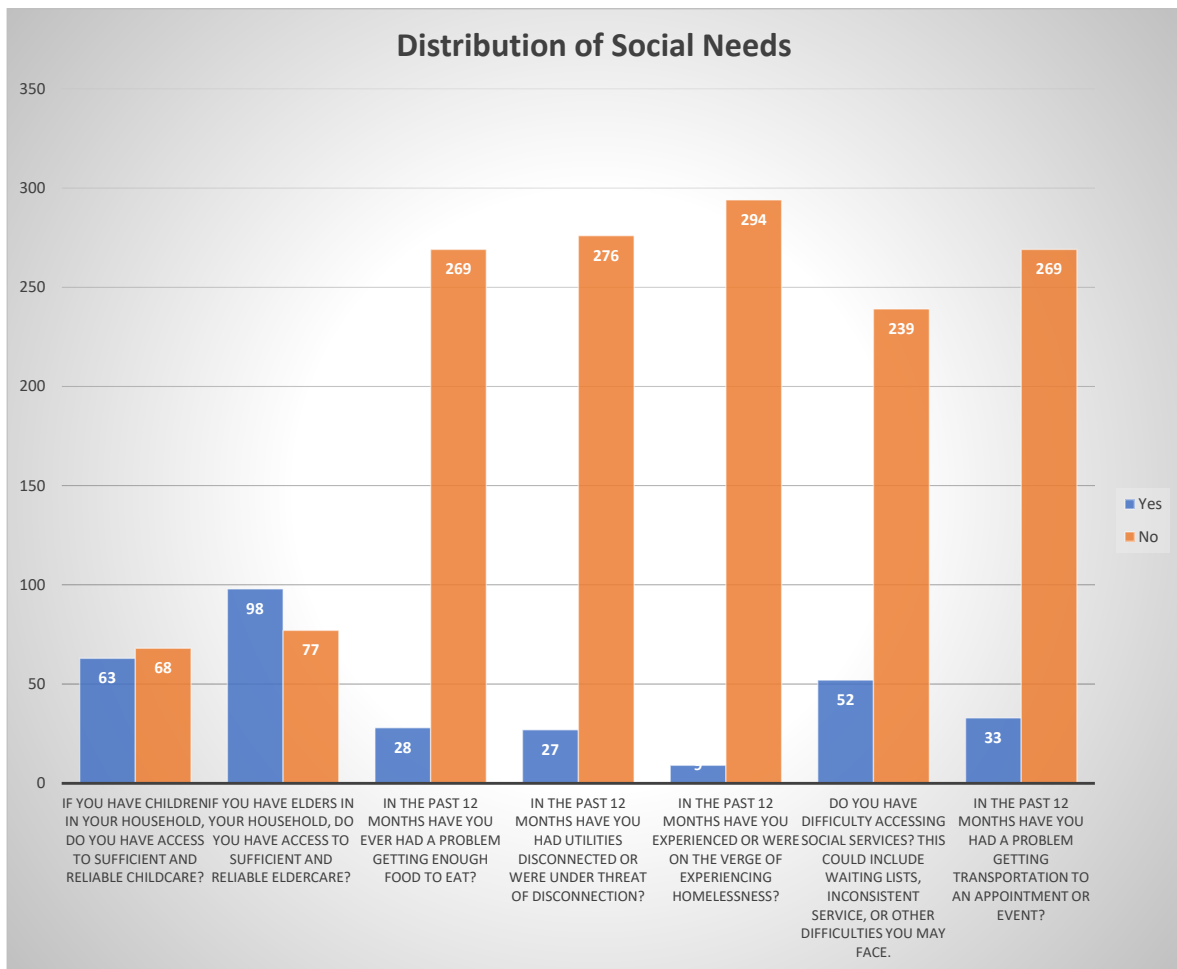


Figure 5 - Distribution of Social Needs

The survey came away with five key findings:

1. **Adult Education is a common want for the town regardless of age**
2. **CoA Portfolio is by far the most wanted service for senior respondents**
3. **As Wareham Families age and grow, services related to leisure with children (grounds, social events) become more important**
4. **As Wareham seniors age, strong support services and activities become more important**
5. **Wareham residents want a robust and varied multi-generational community center regardless of how it is funded**

Further analysis of the results is in the full Steering Committee report and includes breakdowns of support levels by sex and age groups, social service utilization by socioeconomic measures, and word clouds of the open-ended comment questions.

## Alignment with Town Vision

In addition to supporting Wareham's designation as an Age Friendly Community, repurposing the Decas building as a multigenerational community center addresses long-standing community needs and desires asserted in Wareham's Master Plan, a blueprint for how citizens would like to see the town develop. According to the 2020 Master plan, Strategy 4: "the town should work with the emerging coalition of nonprofits to pursue a multi-purpose community center that meets the needs of all of Wareham's citizens." The report further asserts that "children and seniors need the support of their community" but are beleaguered by "funding reductions and rising costs."

Whereas the cost of new construction at \$380-650 per square foot is prohibitive in Wareham, repurposing our existing, town-owned, and recently upgraded school building is within reach and is the only practical way to achieve the goals of a community center to benefit future generations. Another 2020 Master Plan goal is to continue to provide small business startup and incubation opportunities. Incorporating a makerspace, coworking space and allowing rental use of the industrial kitchen are innovative 21st century approaches that support small business owners and "new entrepreneurial ventures while spurring innovation and job creation at the local level," according to the Baker administration. Imagine offering these amenities in the same location as childcare and COA activities and you have a recipe for driving success and creating work/life balance for many Wareham families.

**The town has been working on a community center for years and is part of the Master Plan. This proposal meets the immediate needs of the town and aligns with the Master Plan in a way that will minimize costs to the town and preserve important landmarks.**

## Phased Planning and Schedule

In order to facilitate the potential logistics of establishing the community center, the Steering Committee investigated and developed a notional schedule and logistics plan to outline an organized and efficient move into the new building. At the time of this writing, the plan has not been finalized but is presented in DRAFT form for consideration by stakeholders.



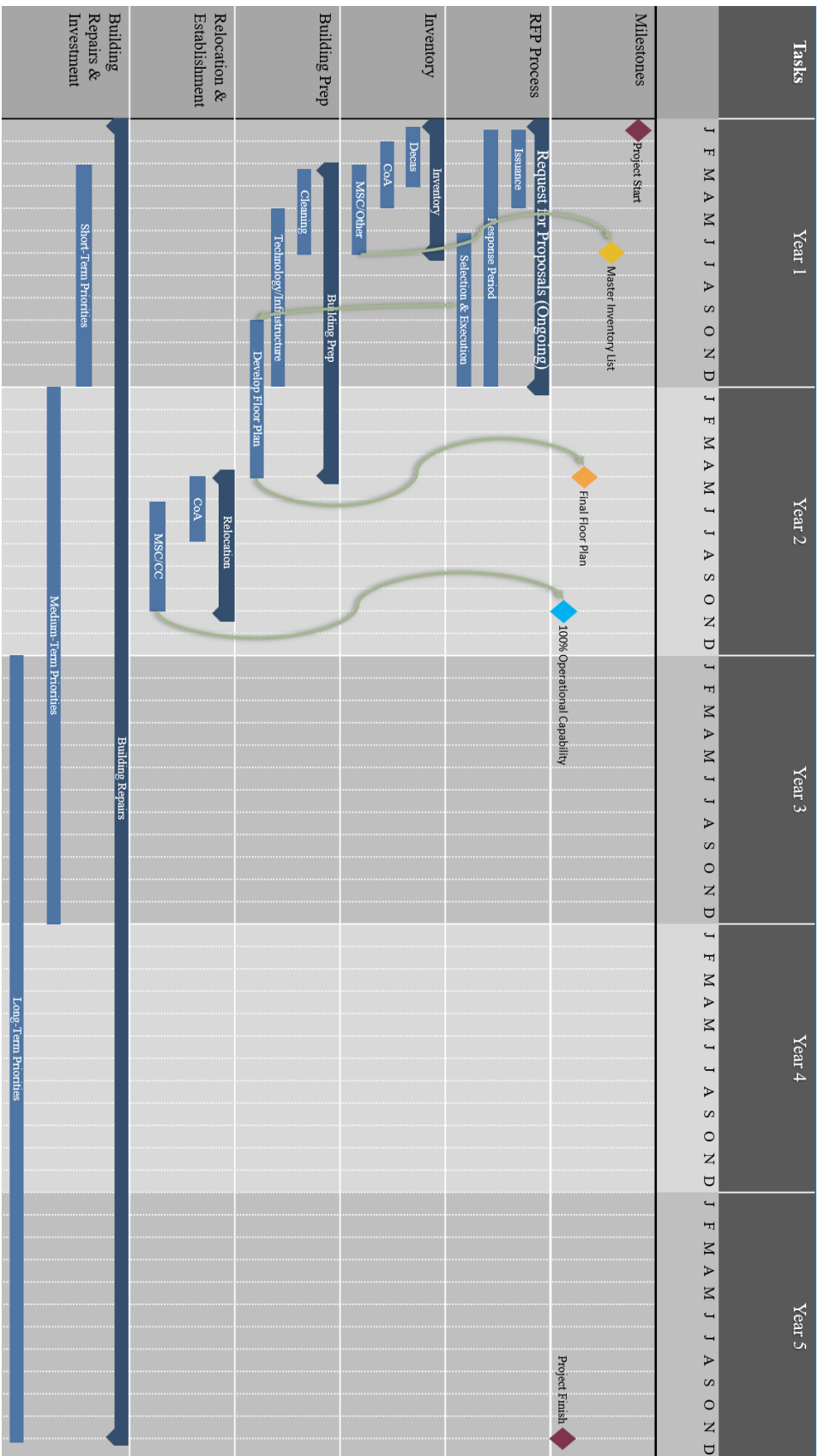


Figure 6 - Notional Schedule

The schedule provides a structured blueprint with realistic timelines to achieve the significant work required to make the community center a possibility. The phases flow as follows:

1. The Town Administrator begins issuing Request for Proposals for tenants, cleaning services, movers, and any other necessary services. The RFP process is ongoing until the building is full and when vacancies may happen.
2. While the RFP process continues the Decas School, Council on Aging, MSC, and any other buildings are inventoried. A Master Inventory List is developed to delineate what is stored where currently.
3. Building preparation begins as the inventory process continues and rooms at Decas are organized. Technology and other infrastructure items are sourced and installed. As RFP responses are received and adjudicated, the Final Floor Plan is developed using the Room Data Sheets from the architectural assessment and the Master Inventory List. This list will indicate who will be in which room and what furniture/infrastructure is required. This list will be updated as the RFP process continues, or tenants turn over.
4. Once the Final Floor Plan is complete, relocation of the CoA and other town services begins. The CoA will be moved into the corresponding space assigned in the Final Floor Plan. The new community spaces like the Maker Space, computer lab, etc. are set up in their respective rooms. Once this is complete, the Community Center is considered 100% operational. This does not indicate the earliest open date since the CoA could begin utilizing the space sooner but instead a milestone in which the community center can be considered open for the general public and activities can be booked/developed.
5. Building Repairs and Investment is an ongoing item addressing the findings of the architectural study. The schedules reflect the triage done by Jones Payne and their specific recommendations.

Since there are many moving pieces and coordinated operations in the community center, daily, weekly, and monthly schedules should be developed where the public would have the opportunity to book rooms and spaces at affordable or zero rates. A hypothetical daily schedule is provided below but by no means is intended to be a rigid or final recommendation. The actual schedule would be dictated by the needs of the center at the time of operation.


 Example Date	
Time	Description
8:00 AM	Building Manager Arrives
8:30 AM	BM Walkthrough and Open Building
9:00 AM	Education Program Students Arrive/Grounds Close
9:30 AM	Council On Aging Gymnasium Activity 1
10:00 AM	Community Kitchen and Breakfast
10:30 AM	Education Program Students Recess
11:00 AM	Adult Education Program 1
11:30 AM	Adult Education Program 2
12:00 PM	Community Kitchen and Lunch
12:30 PM	Education Program AM Students Depart
1:00 PM	Education Program PM Students Arrive
1:30 PM	Council On Aging Gymnasium Activity 2
2:00 PM	Open Art Hour
2:30 PM	Open Art Hour
3:00 PM	After School Program 1
3:30 PM	After School Program 2
4:00 PM	After School Program 3
4:30 PM	Adult Education Program 3
5:00 PM	Community Kitchen and Dinner
5:30 PM	Evening Programming
6:00 PM	Cleaning Services Arrive to Clean
6:30 PM	Community Computer Classes
7:00 PM	Art Show
7:30 PM	Cleaning Services Depart and Building Closed

Figure 7 - Example Daily Schedule

## Comparative Analysis

The final major item to consider in this summary is the comparative analysis done by the Steering Committee regarding some of the alternative proposals for the disposition of the Decas School property. The Steering Committee considers the Community Center as the highest and best use given the alternatives being considered for the town. A summary of the rationale is below:

## Sale & Redevelopment

The Steering Committee considered the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) report published November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020, as the basis for comparison to the community center proposal. Given the Steering Committee's modest allocation of \$15,000, the decision was made to not pursue potentially duplicative work.

To recap the SRPEDD report, the preferred scenario was rezoning the land as a business overlay, tear down the property, and sell to a developer to build a high-intensity lab/flex space in the model of Sensata Tech in Attleboro, MA.

The Steering Committee opposes the plan for the following reasons:

- At the time, the sewer system was sufficient for such development.
  - The current condition of the sewer system would make connections difficult given system capacity. By contrast, the Decas School is already connected to the sewer system and would not add flow.
- The existing asbestos in the building will increase razing costs. The SRPEDD report identifies \$1MM or more to demolish the structure.
- Tax-Increment Financing (TIF) and Chapter 43D overlay will impact tax revenues.
  - Since TIF offsets future tax revenue in exchange for development, the potential for the town is diminished.
- Development would necessarily eliminate the playgrounds and fields.
  - The grounds at Decas were the second most popular item in the community survey. Their removal would significantly degrade the options for our town's youth and athletic groups.
- The SRPEDD report only considered business development and subdivision for a public safety complex. Other municipal uses were outside the scope of the work.
- The SRPEDD report rests on having a developer and business lined up to lease the proposed building.
  - There are already several vacant buildings all along Cranberry Highway, some of which have been vacant for some time.

## Public Safety Complex

The other consideration for the property was a potential site for a public safety complex to include Wareham Fire, Police, and EMS services in one new location. Indeed, the police station is insufficient for the size and activity of our police force and is a major issue to address. Like the SRPEDD analysis, the Steering Committee didn't want to duplicate effort and retread ground that the Public Safety Complex Committee (PSCC) was doing but some members did attend meetings and one of our members also served on the PSCC.

The Steering Committee opposes the use of Decas as a Public Safety Complex for the following reasons:

- Most of the site plans that were reviewed by the PSCC involved removal of the playground and fields.
  - As described above, the playground and fields are a popular activity, and their loss would negatively impact the town.
- One of the plans called for a combination PSC and Senior Center. Some of the Council of Aging members we spoke to were hesitant and concerned about the noise of such an arrangement.
- The costs of building a PSC are not feasible without a debt exclusion. Building the facility would necessarily increase taxes for the town.

## Conclusions

Based on the work of the Steering Committee up to this point, we feel that the Decas Elementary School property would be ideal for a future community center. To reiterate the points above:

- **The building is in good condition and would require no major upfront costs.**
- **There is sufficient space and interest for leasing to offset or eliminate the cost to the town.**
- **The community overwhelmingly supports the community center and needs a broad and effective range of services and activities as part of it.**
- **The proposal aligns with the town Master Plan and meets the long-term goals of making Wareham a place to work and live.**

Given those reasons and others, we respectfully urge the town to move forward on the proposal and begin the process of converting the Decas school into a multi-generational community center. The full report goes into further detail and includes more information on the survey, architectural assessment, and financial analysis.