

## **Community Leaders Voice Optimism for New Whittier Tech High School and Local Cost-Sharing Arrangement**

***Just-released UMass Donahue Institute study recommends “collaborative shared campus model” in which WT and NECC share space and services***

Representatives from Whittier Tech’s communities, including mayors, town managers and city councilors, have expressed strong interest and optimism for a proposal and new cost-sharing arrangement for a new career training high school in partnership with Northern Essex Community College at its Haverhill campus.

The positive comments, sense of cooperation and project momentum have occurred at the most recent meetings of the WT-NECC Municipal Working Group Feb. 25 at Whittier Tech and March 21 at the community college.

Whittier Tech Superintendent Maureen Lynch and NECC President Lane Glenn are leading the meetings with help from special facilitator Dennis DiZoglio, a former Methuen mayor and Merrimack Valley Planning Commission director.

Discussing and eventually negotiating a new regional agreement and capital funding formula governing the school is a main topic and goal of the group, with all members in attendance at the most recent meeting agreeing a new building project cannot happen without a new agreement due to the inclusion of NECC and the state as partners.

The Healy Administration has signaled its support of the Shared Campus model provided the member communities can reach a deal on a new capital funding agreement.

Community leaders and a just-finished, year-long study by the UMass Donahue Institute have called for more public outreach and timely communications about ongoing planning and discussions around the evolving proposal. Whittier Tech’s initial building project proposal was defeated at a district-wide February 2024 election over objections to the \$445 million price-tag and other concerns.

Formal communications documenting the Municipal Working Group meetings are coming soon and regular project updates are available and will continue to be posted on the Whittier Tech and NECC websites. Project updates also occur at monthly WT Regional School Committee meetings and in-person updates will be provided at local Select Board meetings upon request.

The District recently released the nearly 100-page UMass Donahue Institute final report and recommendations along with a 3-page summary – both of which can be found on the project website at: <https://www.necc.mass.edu/about/facilities/whittier-tech/>.

The Donahue Institute, a public service, research and economic development arm of the University of Massachusetts, examined and identified potential new funding streams, cost-saving ideas, mixed-campus models, and best practices for partnering academic, career training and workforce development institutions. Its study included interviews with residents and municipal officials in the Whittier Tech District, and analyzed data on the regional workforce, demographics and labor market.

The Donahue report's most significant recommendation is that Whittier Tech and NECC should pursue a "collaborative shared campus model" in which the two schools share space and services.

The WT-NECC partnership was born in the interest of reducing the price-tag of a new Whittier Tech high school while also creating a first-of-its kind career training secondary education school and community college partnership to benefit young people in the district and the region's future workforce needs.

Without a new building or major expansion and/or renovations that have been projected to outpace the cost of a new school, the future of Whittier Tech's 50-year-old high school is in doubt. The facility is in critical need of a new wastewater treatment plant, new electrical and heating infrastructure, and larger, modern technical training spaces.

The Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) in December voted to preliminarily approve a new WT building project. MSBA will help the District plan and pay for a new high school, provided the District meets certain benchmarks and the communities continue to work together and demonstrate their commitment for a new high school and funding agreement. MSBA had committed \$177 million in state funds, 40% of the cost, toward the former unsuccessful proposal.

To proceed into MSBA's 270-day Project Eligibility Period this coming summer, the District must provide by July 1, 2025, a letter signed by the chief administrative official in each of the 11 district communities certifying their commitment to:

- Amend, as may be needed, the existing 50-year-old WT Regional Agreement between the 11 cities and towns;
- Support the District during the MSBA Feasibility phase to consider a new WT high school building project at current site and proposed relocation to NECC campus;
- Proceed with understanding that WT District is responsible for 100% of cost of a new building project feasibility study, estimated at \$2 to \$2.5 million