

# Visioning for the Coffin School Reuse

## Community Visioning Summary

Prepared for the Town of Marblehead by the  
Metropolitan Area Planning Council

March 15, 2022

# Acknowledgements

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Professional support from MAPC staff was provided by Emma Battaglia, Senior Housing & Land Use Planner, and Lydia Slocum, Regional Housing & Land Use Planner II.

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## Context

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The Town of Marblehead is working with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), the regional planning agency serving the 101 cities and towns in Greater Boston, to study the potential reuse of the Coffin School site at 1 Turner Road for housing and position the site for redevelopment. In October 2021, the Coffin School building became vacant as school operations were shifted to the new Brown School. The Town is interested in building off the previous success of redevelopment vacant schools for housing, most recently at the Gerry School.

This effort stems from the Town's 2020 Housing Production Plan (HPP),<sup>1</sup> a 10-month long public planning process that included several opportunities for community input. The HPP identified the need for new and diverse housing types in Marblehead to accommodate aging households looking to downsize, attract young professionals and young families that support Marblehead's future, and serve low-income households who currently make up almost a third of all households in Marblehead. There is only one deed-restricted Affordable unit for every seven low-income residents in town.

The Coffin School was one of eight municipally-owned sites identified in the HPP for potential housing redevelopment. A priority strategy of the plan is to "repurpose under-utilized or vacant municipal sites for deed-restricted Affordable Housing and market-rate housing serving households at a range of income levels." The Town now seeks to understand the potential for developing housing on the Coffin School site, should the site no longer be of use to the School Department.

Between November 2021 and January 2022, the Town and MAPC held three focus groups meetings and one public forum to gather community feedback. This public engagement was critically important to formulating an overall vision for the site and identifying specific development priorities. The findings are described in detail in the following Community Visioning Summary and have been consolidated into a draft vision for the site.

Since this project first launched, Marblehead's School Committee voted to allow the Coffin School to serve as a temporary home for the library during the ongoing renovation of Abbot Library. The renovation will occur for a minimum of 18 months, meaning the Coffin School will not be vacated until spring 2023 at the earliest. As such, the Town has chosen to pause the remainder of this process until early 2023. At that time, the project team will issue a Request for Information to generate important feedback from housing developers about market potential and trends. That feedback, as well as what is heard during the next public forum, will inform what evaluation criteria will be included in a future Request for Proposals for redevelopment of the site.

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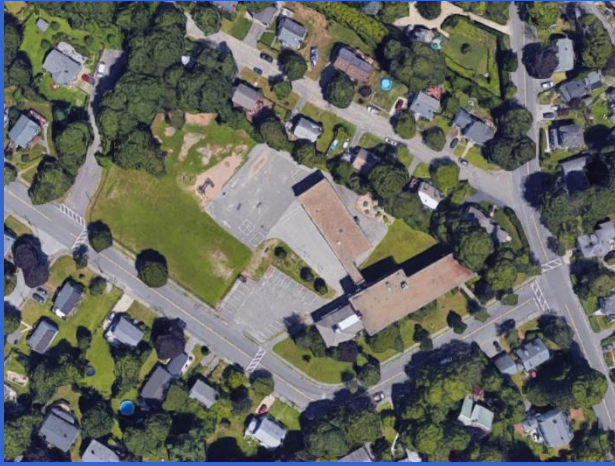
<sup>1</sup> See final HPP at the following link: <https://mapc.ma/marblehead-hpp-final-plan>

## About the Coffin School

Located at 1 Turner Road in Marblehead, the former Coffin School sits on approximately three acres of land and has about 960 linear feet of frontage. The total assessed value for the property in 2021 was \$2,858,100 (\$1,098,900 of which is for the land). The site is within a half-mile of MBTA bus routes that travel through Swampscott, Lynn, and connect to the MBTA Blue Line at Wonderland Station in Revere.

The Coffin School was built in 1948 and the annex was added in 1962. The building is two stories and approximately 30,000 square feet. The façade and interior of the original building have details with architectural significance. While the property is generally in good condition and has been maintained well, significant and costly upgrades would be needed for its continued use. Building systems are antiquated, considered unsafe due to their age, and increasingly harder to maintain. School operations were shifted to the new Brown School because it was more cost-effective than upgrading the existing building, mainly due to ADA-accessibility requirements.

A Capital Needs Assessment (CNA) was recently completed for the site which identified \$260,848 in critical repairs, primarily to replace windows and doors. The CNA also identified \$33,316 in non-critical repairs and \$991,098 in 20-year capital needs. The biggest costs are for a new boiler, HVAC upgrades, and interior refurbishments. There are other large costs associated with replacing and maintaining the roof, overlaying and maintaining asphalt, and replacing site amenities. It is important to note that these costs do not include the ADA-accessibility upgrades necessary to renovate and repurpose this building for public use.



# Focus Group Meetings

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MAPC facilitated three focus group meetings to gather targeted feedback from key stakeholders: Town staff, immediate property abutters, and housing advocates.

## **Town Staff**

A focus group meeting was held with Town staff on November 13, 2021. Participating in the meeting were the Town Administrator, Town Planner, Fire Chief, Superintendent of Recreation & Parks, School Superintendent, and Building Commissioner. The group discussed the current condition of the property, as well as the opportunities and constraints regarding the potential redevelopment.

Town staff prefer that the original portion of the building be preserved if possible. It is a nice building and the neighbors are used to the current scale. They feel that the annex portion should come down as it is not particularly attractive and, according to the Fire Chief, it is not well built. They cited Swampscott's Mashawn School redevelopment as a good example of the kind of adaptive reuse that would make sense for the site. They also thought that small, cottage-style cluster housing could work on some of the undeveloped portions of the site.

The athletic field is used for flag football practice given that the Town is generally tight on space for youth sports. However, there are other options where flag football could practice and the Superintendent of Recreation & Parks stated that his department would not fight the removal of the field. Staff feel that the playground equipment is in good condition and would be nice to keep, either on site or moved to a nearby playground. Their preference is to keep some open space on the site for public access.

A top priority for staff is to create more housing, particularly Affordable Housing, that can serve seniors and keep municipal staff like teachers and police officers in the community. The School Superintendent noted that teacher hiring would benefit from faculty housing or even just more options for teachers in Marblehead. Dedicated senior housing was also identified as a big need.

Staff noted that they expected residents to want to keep the building as a school. However, it is unlikely Marblehead will need additional school space in the future as the town has lost 300 students and continues to see declining enrollment. They would like to see the building sit vacant for as little time as possible. The Gerry School was vacant for three years before it was redeveloped which came at a huge cost for the Town.

## **Property Abutters**

Another focus group meeting was held on November 16, 2021, with immediate property abutters. There were nine residents in attendance. Given the number of homes in the surrounding neighborhood and the need to keep the focus group meeting to a manageable size to enable a small-group discussion, project staff limited invitees to the abutters either

directly adjoining the site or across the street from the site. These are the property owners who would be most impacted by any potential reuse or redevelopment of the site.

In terms of their future vision for the site, focus group participants have a strong desire to see the existing structure preserved and no new buildings on the site. They expressed concern over blasting on the site. They also want ample open space preserved and for it to be accessible to the public. In particular, they would like the Town to retain the sports fields and for the redevelopment to include new walking paths through the site.

Participants feel that the neighbors should be involved in more detailed planning for what kind of housing goes on the site and at what scale. Some noted a preference for family housing on the site, though many of the concerns mentioned around school capacity and traffic would imply that senior or workforce housing would be preferable. Any project should be of high quality and provide adequate parking and traffic management.

Some neighbors are upset that the school is no longer in use. They would prefer if the Town can maintain public use of the site either as a school or location for adult education, though one participant questioned whether the Town could maintain the building well given the upgrades needed.

Amongst participants, there was generally a resistance to any new housing in Marblehead, and particularly in this area given the proximity to the Marblehead Housing Authority property on Green Street. They were concerned about concentrating Affordable Housing in one section of town at the same time that the neighborhood school is removed. Abutters also voiced concerns about the increased number of students in school, density on the site, increased traffic, impacts from demolition on adjacent homes, and the amount of lighting and noise.

## **Housing Advocates**

The third focus group meeting was held on January 20, 2022, with the housing advocates who serve on Marblehead's Fair Housing Committee. They offered their priorities for the reuse of the site and suggestions for combatting potential neighborhood opposition.

Members agree that the new project must enhance the neighborhood and that this will help reduce resistance to the redevelopment. There were mixed opinions regarding the preservation of the existing building given its lack of historic value, but members acknowledged that neighbors are used to the scale which is one less barrier. While public open space is important, there is considerable open space in the immediate neighborhood already and new housing, including Affordable Housing, should be the main priority. Attractive landscaping can go a long way and will help bring support of neighbors. Community space or other public amenities inside the building would be a great benefit. They cited Oliver's Pond as a good example of a new 40B development that improved the property values around it.

The Fair Housing Committee described mixed-income housing, with a mix of market-rate and Affordable Housing, as likely the best approach for the site. They support either rental

or ownership for the future units, and ideally a mix of both. Though they feel that there is plenty of market-rate housing in Marblehead, they acknowledge that it will likely be needed to subsidize the cost of the Affordable units. They would prefer to see some deeper levels of affordability offered beyond 80% of the area median income (AMI), such as 50 or 60% AMI, to serve those with the most housing need. New housing should encourage cultural diversity and serve seniors and people who work in Marblehead but cannot afford to live there, such as waiters, teachers, and recent college graduates. Members would support a local preference option for up to 70% of Affordable units given that the Housing Authority does not offer that and it would help increase local support. More units should be ADA-accessible than required by law.

In terms of likely opposition to this process, the Fair Housing Committee noted that we are likely to hear the strongest objections from a few vocal residents. It will be necessary to address quality of design up front and provide continued education about need for Affordable Housing in Marblehead. The message should be promoted that Affordable Housing helps the town and, with high quality design, can be a positive addition to the neighborhood. Members offered to network with other Town committees once they have a visual aid for redevelopment of the site leading up to the eventual Town Meeting vote.

# Public Forum

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MAPC and the Town hosted a public forum that was open to the full Marblehead community on Tuesday December 7, 2021. About 90 people participated in the forum, which was held remotely on Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the event, the team shared project information and context, answered resident questions, and asked for input on a vision for the site and redevelopment priorities. This section summarizes the feedback heard during the public forum. Please see the Appendix for the full polling results and a recap of the Q&A portion of the event.

## Who's in the Room?

At the start of the meeting, the participants were asked series of optional poll questions about their demographic and housing situations. This provided the project team with some background on who was in attendance and how the demographics of the meeting compare with Marblehead as a whole. The following is a summary of the responses:

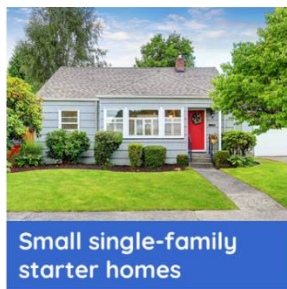
- Nearly all attendees (over 96%) own their home.
- The majority (82%) of attendees live in a single-family home.
- Two thirds (66%) of attendees are between 45 and 74 years old.
- Just over half (56%) of attendees live in one- or two-person households.
- Almost two-thirds (74%) of attendees have lived in Marblehead for 21 or more years.
- Just over half (55%) of attendees live in the neighborhood around Coffin School, 42% live elsewhere in Marblehead, and 3% do not live in Marblehead.

## Visioning Questions

Participants were asked questions about the kind of housing they think is needed in Marblehead, their preferences for the preservation of the existing building, and their priorities for the site in order to inform the community vision for the site. The following is a summary of the responses:

- Attendees ranked “choices for residents wanting to downsize,” “more or better rental options,” and “smaller housing options” as the top housing needs across Marblehead.
- The three highest priority populations to serve in Marblehead were seniors, families, and low-income households.
- Attendees most strongly supported the creation of small single-family starter homes, cottage housing, and the adaptive reuse of historic buildings at the Coffin School site and in Marblehead generally.
- Nearly half (49%) of attendees think just the original Coffin School building should be preserved (not annex) and another 24% believe both buildings should be preserved.
- There was strong support for keeping open space on this site, with 85% of attendees wanting to see some or all of the existing open space maintained.
- Top priorities for site reuse were providing Affordable Housing units, preserving the existing building, and providing new public open space amenities.

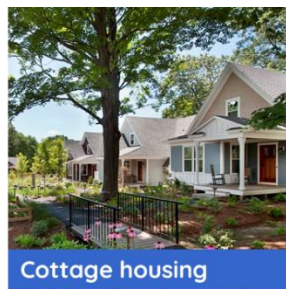
Attendees were asked about their preferences for the following housing typologies at the Coffin School site and in Marblehead generally:



Small single-family starter homes



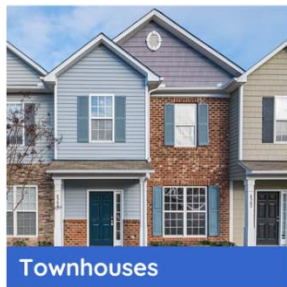
Detached ADUs



Cottage housing



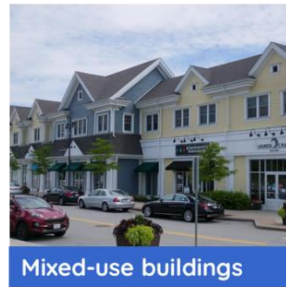
2- and 3-family homes



Townhouses



Multifamily buildings



Mixed-use buildings



Adaptive reuse of historic buildings

## Discussion

The following three options for the site reuse emerged during the forum:

1. **Prioritize housing development.** A number of attendees at the forum felt that redeveloping the site for housing, in particular Affordable Housing, should be prioritized given the high cost and low supply of housing in Marblehead. They support redeveloping the original school building, the annex building if appropriate, and potentially adding new structures on the site.
2. **Prioritize community and open space.** Other attendees felt that the site is not appropriate for housing and should instead be prioritized for public use. The open space should remain as it is today and the existing building should be reused as Town offices or community space.
3. **Prioritize a mix of both.** There were also attendees who fell somewhere in the middle, believing that the site can support some housing while also prioritizing public usage. They support redeveloping the existing building with housing while the Town retains ownership over some or all of the open space for public use.

There was generally agreement that whatever does get built should fit in with the existing neighborhood scale. This could include the adaptive reuse of the existing building and potentially the addition of single-family starter homes or cottages. New multifamily and mixed-use buildings are likely not appropriate for this neighborhood. Sustainable practices and high-quality design should be utilized.

Attendees mentioned different ideas for public amenities on the site, including:

- Keeping the playground and playing fields
- Town offices
- Community gardens
- Ice rink
- Artist studios
- Community environmental center with outdoor space
- Adult education

Neighbors raised concerns about the redeveloping the site and increasing housing density in this residential neighborhood. Concerns include:

- Future need for more school space (universal Pre-K)
- Removal of valued open space and recreation facilities
- Increased traffic
- Potential risk to adjacent properties from construction activities
- Lack of clear communication from the Town about the process and plans

Should the site be redeveloped for housing, there were mixed opinions about what income levels to target. A number of attendees feel that providing Affordable Housing for low-income and moderate-income families is a priority, and that some or all of the units should be deed-restricted Affordable units. Some questioned whether a mixed-income project that includes market-rate units would further drive prices up in Marblehead. There was also concern from adjacent residents that there is a significant amount of Affordable Housing already built in the neighborhood.

## Vision

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The collective feedback heard during focus group meetings and the forum yields an initial vision for the Coffin School property. This vision includes:

- A vibrant housing community with varying types and scales of housing options. This includes the adaptive reuse of the original school building as apartments or condos, potentially serving seniors. New small-scale, cottage-style detached homes that align with the existing neighborhood scale could be appropriate elsewhere on the site for young families or working professionals.
- High quality design and construction used throughout the development, which has a mix of Affordable and market-rate housing.
- Preserving ample open space accessible to the neighbors and wider Marblehead community. Open space should include public amenities, such as playing fields, a playground, and/or community gardens. Community uses inside the school building that would coexist well with housing should be considered
- A redevelopment process in which neighbors and the full Marblehead community are thoroughly engaged.

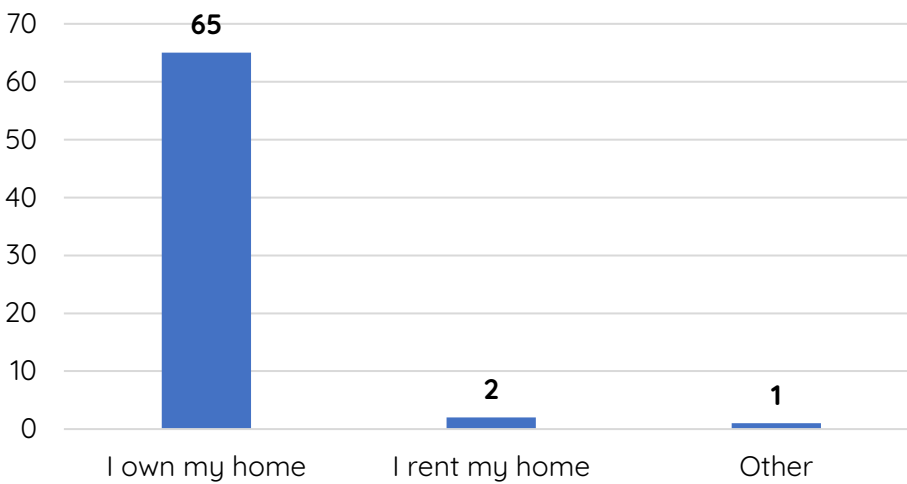
## Appendix: December 7, 2022, Forum Recap

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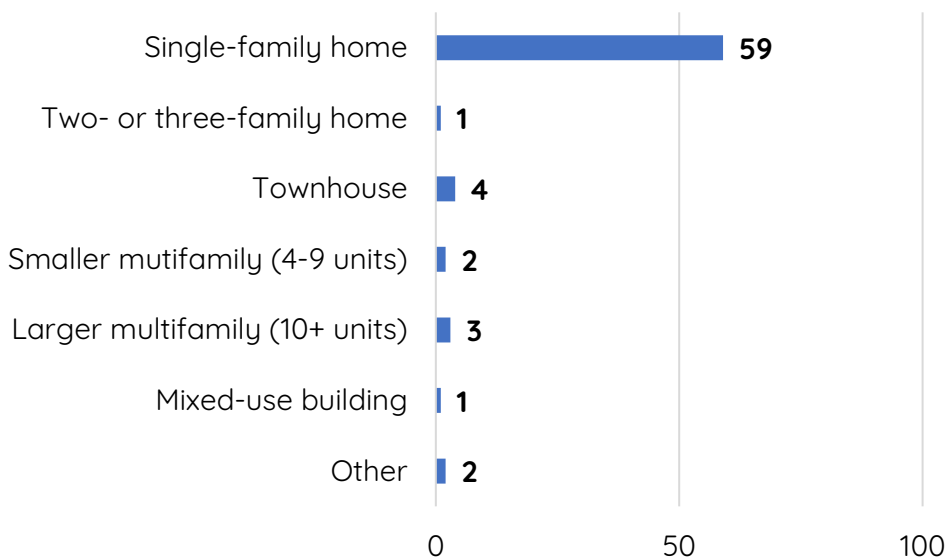
### Polling Results

#### Who's in the Room?

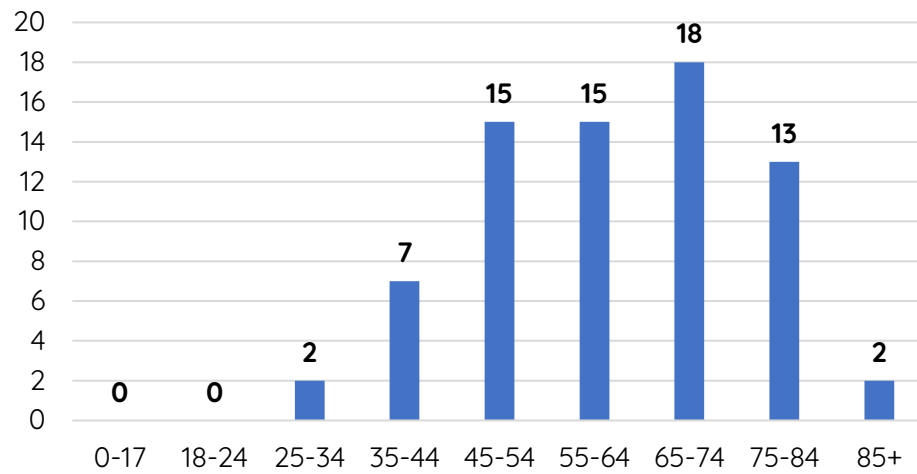
##### How would you describe your living situation?



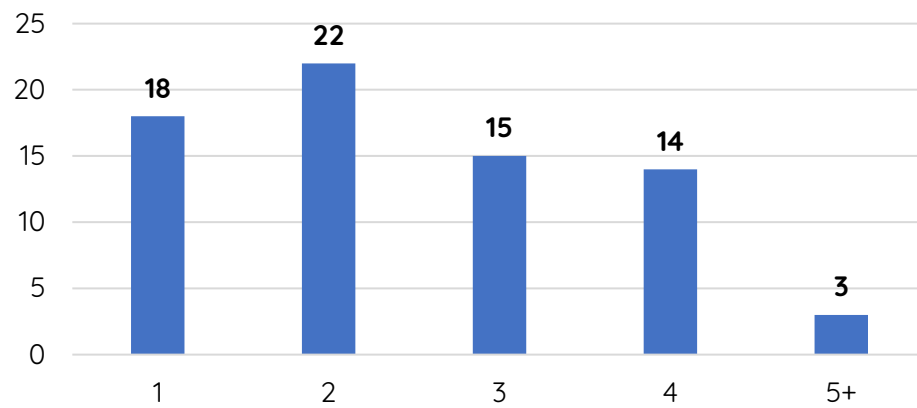
##### What kind of housing do you live in?



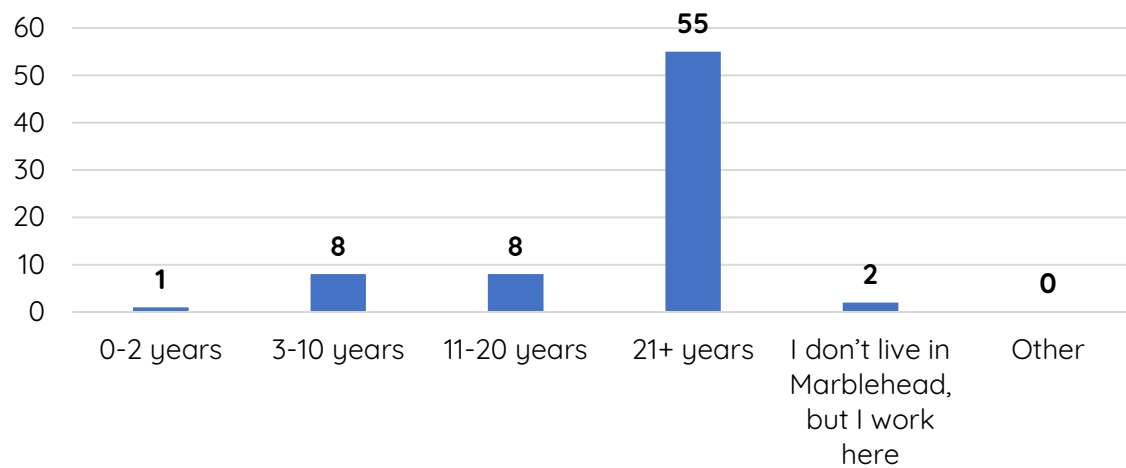
### How old are you?



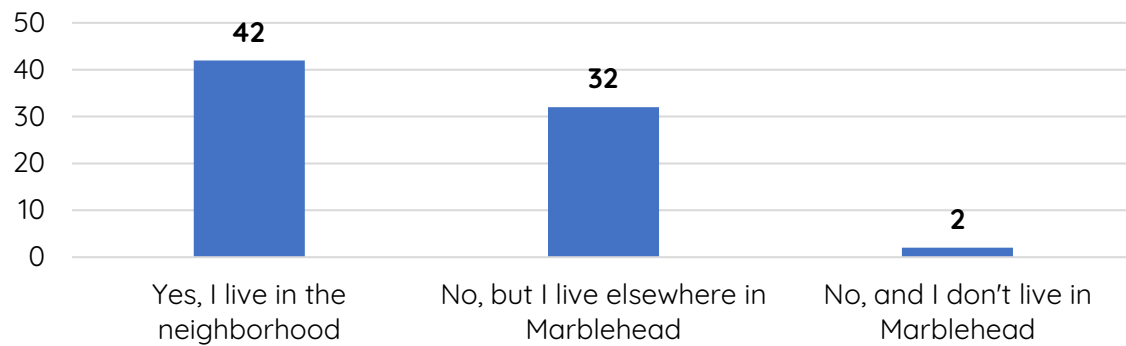
### How many people live in your household?



### How long have you lived in Marblehead?

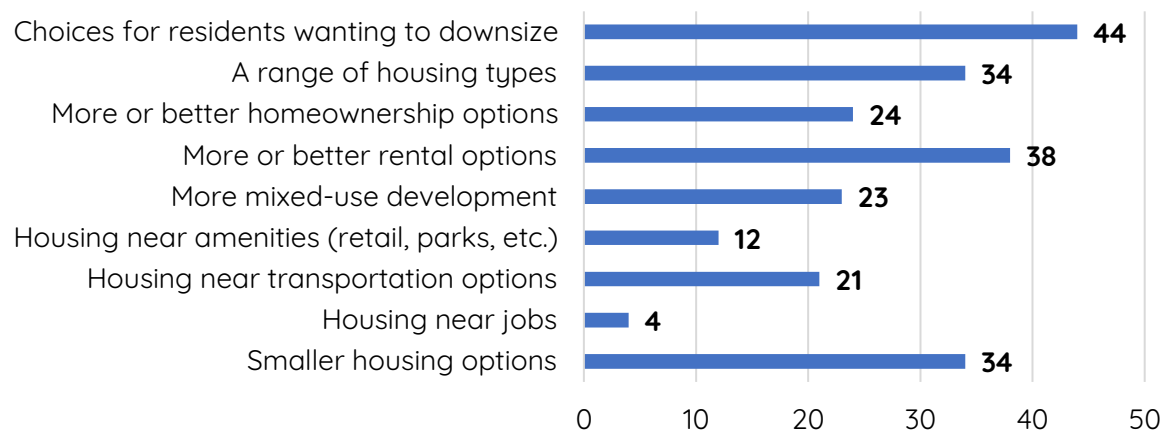


### Do you live in the neighborhood around the Coffin School?

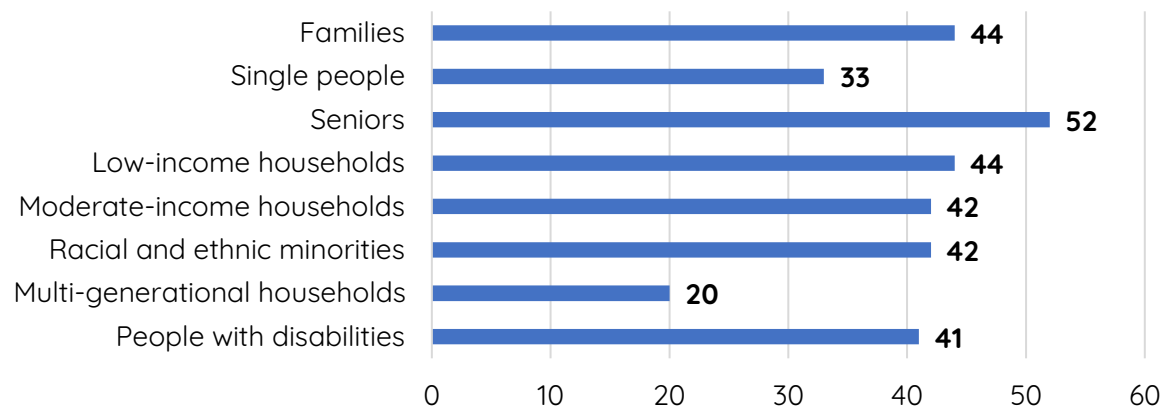


### Visioning Activities

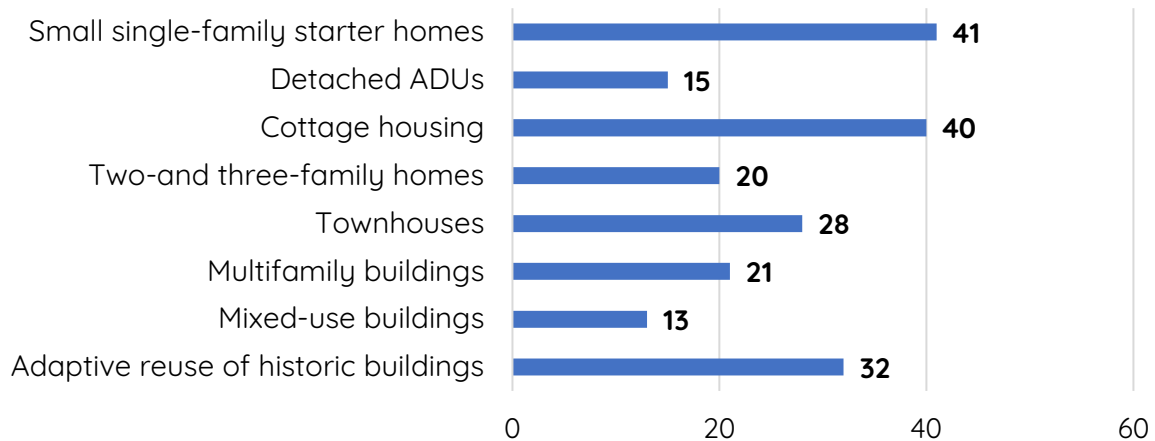
#### What kinds of new housing do you think are most needed in Marblehead?



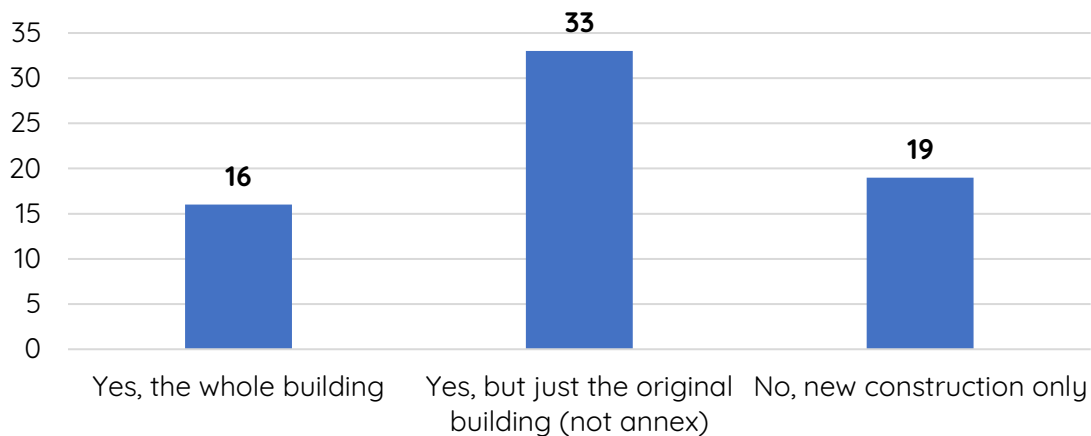
#### What populations should new housing serve?



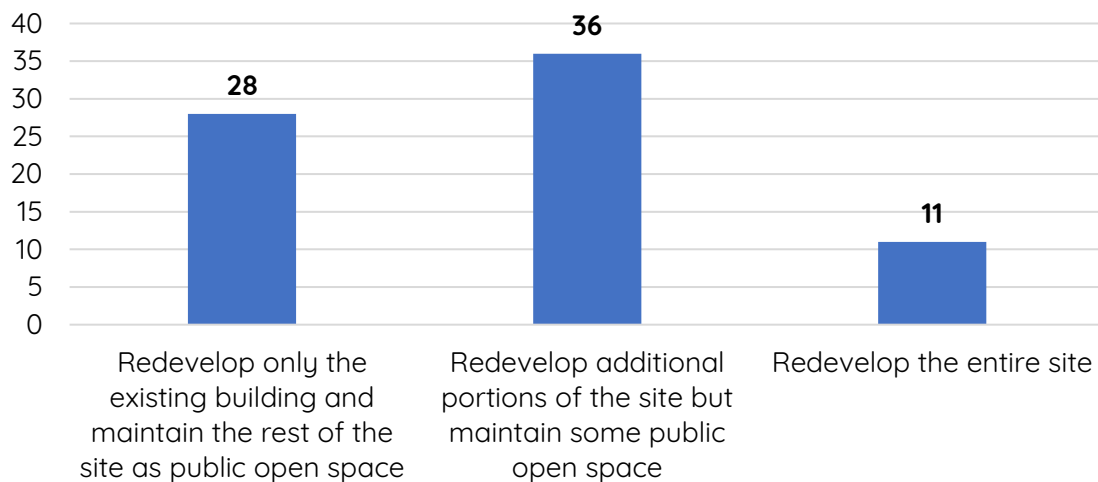
### What housing typologies do you think are most needed in Marblehead?



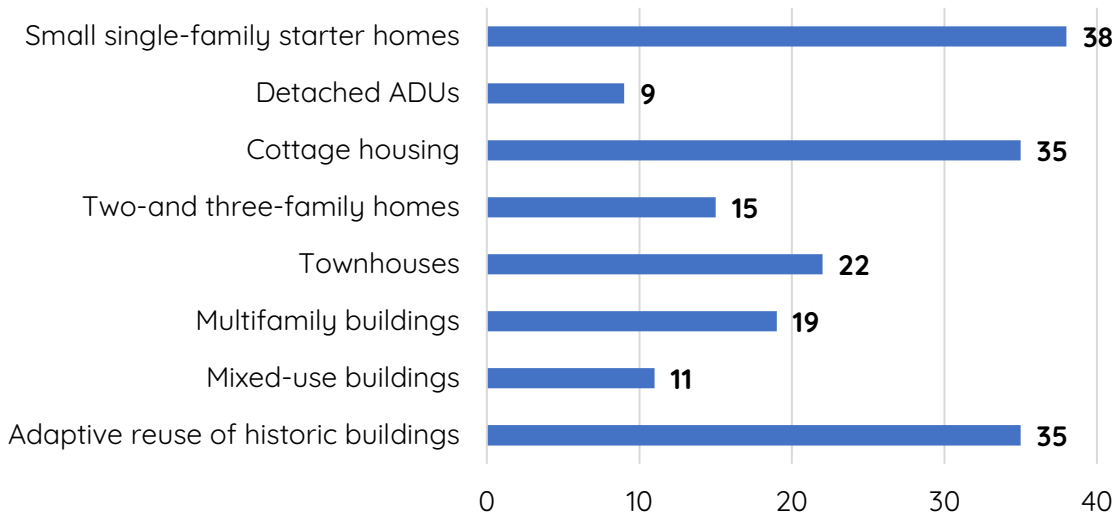
### Do you think the existing school building should be preserved?



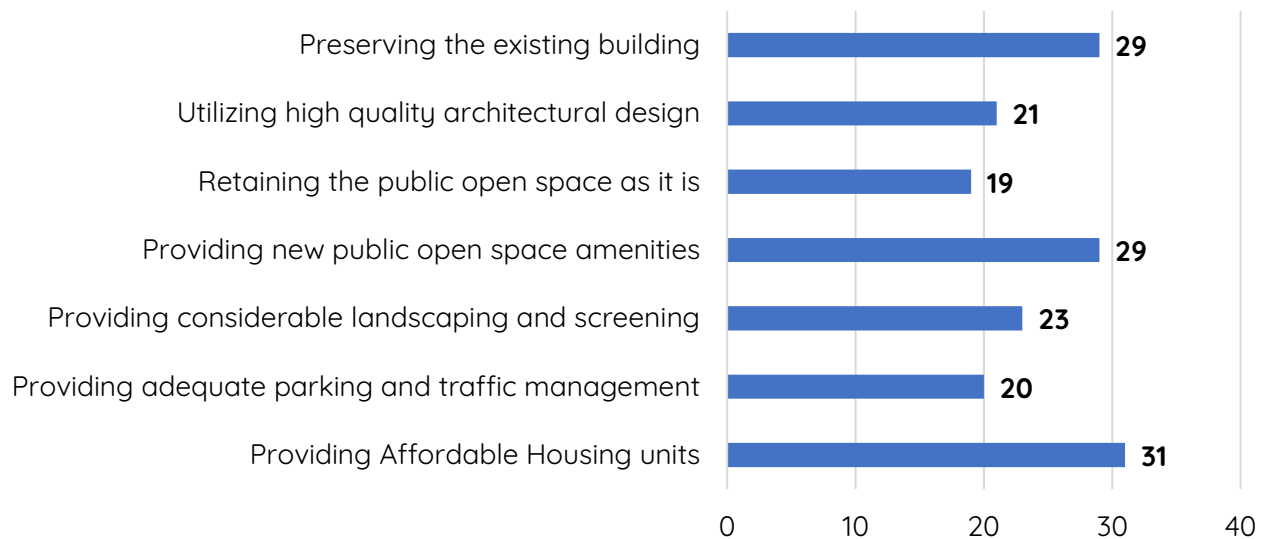
### How should housing and open space be balanced?



### What housing typologies do you think make the most sense for the Coffin School site?



### What are your top priorities for the site reuse?



## Q&A

The following questions were asked and answered live during the December 7 forum. We have endeavored to answer the questions more fully in this document.

### **How many people are on this call?**

There are about 90 people at the meeting right now.

### **Why do you want this to be housing?**

The school building was vacated in October of 2021 and students were moved to the new Brown School. The building is no longer being used as a school and this site was identified for housing development as a part of Marblehead's Housing Production Plan (HPP). The HPP was a 10-month long planning process that included several opportunities for community input. It identified the need for new and diverse housing types in Marblehead that will retain aging households looking to downsize, attract young professionals and young families that support Marblehead's future, and serve low-income households who currently make up almost a third of all households in Marblehead. The Boston region, and Marblehead in particular, is in a crisis where the demand for housing far outstrips the supply. This contributes to incredibly high home prices and rents, making Marblehead inaccessible to all but the highest earners. In addition to the need for more deed-restricted Affordable Housing, there is also a need for new housing for a range of income levels in order to better meet demand and stabilize prices.

### **Have other sites in town been considered for housing other than Coffin School and if so, can we get a list of those?**

Yes, there have been several potential sites identified in the HPP. Sites are identified on pages 57- 78. See a link to the HPP here:

[https://www.marblehead.org/sites/g/files/vyhlif4661/f/uploads/final\\_marblehead\\_hpp\\_for\\_dhcd\\_review\\_06.18.2020\\_1\\_0.pdf](https://www.marblehead.org/sites/g/files/vyhlif4661/f/uploads/final_marblehead_hpp_for_dhcd_review_06.18.2020_1_0.pdf)

### **Why not develop the Eveleth School property as housing instead?**

The Town intends to also assess the Eveleth School for its housing potential as a part of a future project. This project is specifically assessing the future reuse of the Coffin School site.

### **Is this the only option for the site?**

This is the first option being assessed for the site. The Town is exploring different housing development options at this time per recommendations of the Marblehead Housing Production Plan.

### **Will this mean that the Town will sell this property?**

If the building is determined to have no municipal need, then that is what the Town is exploring through the RFP process. This process allows the Town to have a say in what might be built there. Tonight, we are thinking about a vision for the site.

**What is deed-restricted Affordable Housing?**

Deed-restricted Affordable Housing is required to cost no more than 30% of a household's income and is meant for low-income households earning less than 80% of the Greater Boston Area Median Income (AMI). For a single person, 80% of the AMI equals \$70,750. For a family of four, this equals \$101,050.

**Was the Coffin School ever considered for the library?**

Abbot Library has been granted use of the Coffin School during their renovation. A large override was passed at Town Meeting last year to renovate Abbot Library. Given its central location in Marblehead and direct access to public transit, the Town wishes to retain Abbot Library.

**What is the cost of demolition and rebuilding? It's greener to renovate, surely for whatever purpose?**

We will have a better idea of these costs later in the process once we have completed the RFI and RFP processes and conducted the market and development analysis that will be doing internally. This will help us figure out how the different options line up financially and understand what is feasible from a development perspective.

**If the site ends up being mixed housing, how does that help solve our affordable housing deficit? Won't that just create a bigger deficit?**

Adding to the stock of housing and affordable housing, even if modest, will help meet housing need in town since more housing is needed at all price points.

**What is the time frame for this site?**

This visioning effort will continue into March 2022 with the drafting of a Request for Proposal (RFP) to private and non-profit developers. However, there are many additional steps in the process. If the School Committee determines they no longer need the Coffin School for school purposes, they can vote to transfer it to the care, custody, management, and control of the Board of Selectmen. They would give notice to the Board of Selectmen that the school is no longer needed for school purposes, then the Board of Selectmen would vote to place an article on the Town Meeting warrant to transfer the Coffin School building and grounds from the School Committee to the Board of Selectmen. The Board of Selectmen can make the vote for the purpose of selling the school (if that is what they want to do) or take another action (such as municipal reuse, lease, demolition, etc.). The transfer must be approved by Town Meeting. If the transfer is approved, the Town may authorize the Board of Selectmen to sell the school and execute any and all necessary documents for that purpose. If it is decided to sell the building, the process for Chapter 30B real property dispositions would be followed.

**Will the building be sold to the highest bidder no matter what we say?**

No, the developer selected through the RFP process will be chosen based on the best proposal offered that most closely meets the community's goals. Through this process, the criteria for the evaluation of proposals will be developed to determine what is most important to the Town.

**Who determines the criterion and what constitutes the “best” proposal?**

Based on what we hear throughout the public process, the Town will likely impose conditions on the property through the RFP. The Town can lay-out the parameters that are non-negotiable and then the developers will respond with what they can offer in terms of those parameters. The evaluation criteria will be developed through this process and there will be minimum criteria and then evaluation criteria.

**When is the next forum?**

The next forum will occur in late winter and will cover the redevelopment scenarios proposed for the Coffin School site.