

# Littleton Track Organization Statement

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*February 14, 2011 Board of Selectmen Meeting*

**The Littleton Track Organization is requesting that the Board of Selectmen support a funding mechanism for the May 2011 Town Meeting that would allow a new track and field facility to be completed in time for the spring 2012 track season.**

- **Price will increase if we delay beyond 2011.**
- **Recurring costs will continue because we cannot host home meets.**
- **With current facility, student athletes and residents are exposed to safety issues and the Town continues to be exposed to liability.**
- **Delay past May 2011 will mean another season of inadequate training and competition facilities for two varsity athletic teams.**
- **Project is well overdue, its scale is appropriate for the Town, and has been supported at past two Annual Town Meetings.**
- **Changes to CPA funding regulations are uncertain with both Beacon Hill and Town.**
- **Project will be ready to move forward and will lose momentum and support from community if we do not start this year.**

## **Waiting Increases Risk and Delays Project Past 2012 Track Season**

The necessary work to build the new Littleton track facility in the summer of 2011 either has already been completed or will be completed very soon. It is now time to put the question to the Town residents and let them decide if they want to fund a new track and field facility. The track in its current state is unsafe and the Town needs to take action to address the condition of the facility. The Town has been asked to fund projects to address a leaking roof, a failed septic system, and a potentially unsafe pole storage barn. It is not clear why an unsafe track that is used by elementary students, student athletes at LMS and LHS, and community members would be dealt with any differently. This is especially true since the conditions increase risks to people and not just property.

There is also much to lose by waiting. Engineers and experts in track construction have indicated that there are very favorable bid conditions now, and that project costs in the future have the risk of increasing significantly as materials and labor costs rise as more track projects in the region come into the pipeline. In addition, the finance experts indicate that this is a very favorable time to borrow money, and that the risk of future increases of interest rates is quite real.

A delay of project funding past May 2011 will mean that the project cannot be completed in time for the 2012 track season, effectively delaying this project again for at least one more year. For instance, if funding were approved at a fall 2011 Town meeting, construction could not be completed for the 2012 track season.

On a smaller, but still important, scale, each year that Littleton is not able to host home track meets approximately \$2,000 of additional transportation costs are incurred for the LHS athletic programs. This pays for transportation to away meets that otherwise would have been held at home if a safe facility existed in Littleton. With the spring 2011 track season marking the third consecutive year that Littleton has not been able to schedule home meets, the additional costs are at \$6,000.

Littleton can be expected to pay significantly more – construction costs, borrowing costs, and transportation costs – for this project if it is not done this summer. The LTO is certainly aware that there are many other projects in Littleton that will be seeking funding in future years. Obtaining the funding for the track this year will allow other projects to move forward in the coming years.

## Liability

On April 8, 2009, the Town's insurance company, Massachusetts Interlocal Insurance Association, conducted a liability survey of the Littleton track facility. They found, "the track surface is in poor condition with several significant cracks throughout. The track appears to have poor drainage which results in ponding in various sections. The long jump track is also in poor condition with chipped and cracked asphalt. Each of these issues pose a potential trip and fall hazard to a user." The report goes on to state that in most cases towns are protected from liability by General Laws c. 21, sec. 17(c), but that because Littleton hosts off-site track meets due to the condition of the track, one could argue, "that the Town should have acted to make reasonable maintenance repairs since the facility is open to the public, therefore forfeiting this protecting if an incident were to occur."

## Providing Adequate Facilities to Our Student Athletes

The track program is among the largest athletic programs in our schools. Having a track and field facility that is not suitable for competition has two significant impacts on the student athletes in the track program. We have previously mentioned the inability to host home meets. Instead of having home field advantage of competing where they train and opportunities for friends and community members to watch them compete and cheer them on at home, student athletes are faced with bus rides to other facilities for all of their competitions. While the inability to host home meets may affect the teams for about half of their meets, the condition of the track and field facility severely hinders their training and practice **every single day** during the season. The Littleton track teams use the facility to practice a minimum of two hours each and every day. While meets may be held off-site, it is simply not possible to perform at one's potential if one cannot practice and train properly.

When the LTO was formed, there were youth who were just beginning their first weeks of high school. If this project is not done this summer, those same youths will complete their high school years, graduate, and leave the Littleton school system without ever having an opportunity to benefit from training on a safe, quality track, or the experience of having a single home track meet during their entire four years of high school. With funding for the track approved in May 2011, the track will be finished for these same student-athletes' to have the benefit of using in their final senior year.

Of the 25 schools in the Midland Wachusett League, 23 provide track and field facilities suitable for competitive use and training. The two remaining schools are Tahanto Regional Middle/High School (Berlin-Boylston) and Littleton High School. Tahanto currently does not have a track and field facility, but it should be noted that one is included in the site plan for their new building project scheduled to break ground in 2011. Littleton risks distinguishing itself as being the only one in their league of 25 schools without these basic facilities.

Certainly the track may be suitable for casual joggers and walkers, just as an uneven court with cracks may be suitable for a casual pickup basketball game, or a field with dips and trenches may be suitable for a casual game of soccer or football. However, none of these scenarios is suitable for student athletes who are training and practicing to improve and perform at their highest levels. If any of the football, basketball, or baseball teams could not effectively practice and had been unable to have home games for the past three years, it is difficult to imagine that there would be discussion of delaying a remedy for another year.

When other area towns have built new tracks, participation in the sport as well as community use of the facility has greatly increased. Littleton can certainly expect an increase in use as well as the potential for a variety of community fitness programs. Town residents have lost the use of safe, quality facilities that they once enjoyed, and many would like to have these back as soon as possible.

## **Project Scale Is Appropriate and Well Overdue**

Following the completion of the Feasibility Study, the LTO has consistently advocated for the lowest priced option that will provide the Town with a safe and usable track and field facility. The scope of the project is appropriate and suitable for the Town of Littleton. The request is not for a new type of facility such as a swimming pool, ice rink, or artificial turf field that the Town does not currently own. Nor is it a request for an extravagant facility with “all the extras” – it is a simple request to return an athletic and recreational facility that the Town has had since 1979 to a safe and fully usable state.

This project is also well overdue to be addressed – it is not the case that the track facility is “cutting in line” in front of other capital requests desired by Town departments. The simple fact is that the current facility surpassed its expected lifespan many years ago, and has been completely unusable for competition the past three years. During the past decade that the track facility was beyond its expected lifespan, the Town has on three separate occasions let logical opportunities pass to address this issue, with the building of LHS, the building of LMS, and extensive renovations at RSS. Research into how other Massachusetts towns provided track facilities for their schools and residents shows that a majority included re-building their aged track facilities with a school building or renovation project. Indeed, every other facility which previously existed for all other Littleton athletic programs has been significantly improved during this time frame. Littleton’s failure to deal with the known issue of its track facility at each of those three opportunities is unfortunate and has resulted in the current situation in which the LTO, a citizen’s group, must advocate that the track be “next in line” for capital projects. It should be noted that when the Town decided in 1979 to build the current track, the project was funded through a debt exclusion that was widely supported, even though it was a difficult time economically.

## **The False Allure of Potential CPA Funding**

The LTO is not unaware of recent suggestions that this project be delayed further in the hopes that Beacon Hill will possibly pass legislation that may expand the permitted uses of Town CPA funds. The LTO believes this would be a mistake.

The argument to wait for legislation to change rules for CPA funding sounds remarkably familiar – it is essentially the same argument put forth a year ago when similar legislation was working its way through the legislature. In the spring of 2010, the LTO requested that the Board of Selectmen seek a debt exclusion at the May 2010 Town Meeting to fund the construction of a track facility based upon the completed feasibility study. The Board of Selectmen declined to move forward with seeking a funding mechanism for the track facility, in part, because of the strong likelihood this legislation would become law in 2010. Despite that optimism and the fact that the legislation was supported by many towns and legislators across the Commonwealth, this bill died at the end of the legislative session without being voted on, much less being passed into law. The LTO has not seen positive evidence that this legislative session will yield different results.

In addition, assuming that the legislation indeed passes, it appears unrealistic that the entire project cost would be met through CPA funds. In the past, CPA funds have been used to partially fund projects, and funds provided have been in a range up to \$215,000. Given Littleton's commitment to increasing open space, affordable housing, and historical preservation, it remains unclear whether the Town would choose to use a significant portion of CPA funds for a track and field facility. Therefore, an exclusion vote, or other funding mechanism, would most likely still be required – in addition to a vote for CPA funds. The LTO wants the Town to be able to vote on this issue now, and we are asking the Board to support a debt exclusion vote for this May's Town Meeting, or support another funding mechanism that would allow a new track and field facility to be completed in time for the spring 2012 track season.

The LTO does not believe it is wise to delay the track project for another year of increasing risk – of personal injury, of rising construction costs, and rising interest rates – to wait for legislation that may not happen and ultimately may not avoid a debt exclusion. If this legislation does eventually become law, and the Town decides to use CPA funds for recreational rehabilitation projects, the LTO is certain that numerous worthy projects can be found to improve recreational opportunities for Littleton residents.

## **Capitalize on Current Momentum and Support**

The LTO has already done a great deal of work to publicize this issue and to inform Town boards and residents. Information has been available for two years at the LTO website, there have been numerous meetings and community presentations, and there has been extensive local newspaper coverage. The LTO has raised almost \$11,000 for future maintenance of the track. A delay now risks stalling the project and effectively stops forward momentum. We encourage the Board to fully capitalize on the efforts thus far and allow this project to move forward to its next logical stage – a vote by the Town residents.