



## A tale of two cities

It is the best of times.

Two municipalities in Bristol County, Fall River and Westport, have amazing best-of-times chances to build brand-new schools and pay only a fraction of the costs. Fall River and Westport received funding from the Massachusetts School Building Authority, a state agency that distributes funds collected through the state sales tax. One cent from everything we buy goes to this fund, and school districts all over the state compete for this funding.

Only 10 percent of the districts applying in any year get accepted, which makes it even more momentous that two districts in our area got the green light.

Westport (okay, not a city) and Fall River are on the cusp of receiving a collective investment of more than \$150 million to solve problems in their communities. In Westport, they propose a \$97 million middle-high school, tearing down and remediating its contaminated and closed middle school. They will replace it with a 21<sup>st</sup> century educational building to house grades 5 through 12, anticipating the issues ahead with the more than 60-year-old high school. The town's cost? About \$39 million of that. As the Herald News said in a recent editorial urging voters to say yes, "But if the proposal is approved, Westport will receive a deal hard to ignore in the form of reimbursement from the Massachusetts School Building Authority." (December 7, 2017)

Fall River will replace the problem-plagued Durfee High School with a bright, modern building that will become, in Superintendent Matthew Malone's words, "the jewel in the crown of this amazing city." The city is eligible for up to 80 percent reimbursement of the projected \$260 million building cost. Sharp pencils are still figuring final costs, but this fact is clear – Fall River's cost for a new high school is less than the cost of renovating the current Durfee.

The ripple effect of building new schools will benefit more than families with children.

A new school invests in the community, bringing jobs in the short term as they build the facilities and pride in the long term. Countless examples around the country demonstrate that investing in new schools increases enrollment, academic achievement, and property values.

And even more important, it makes the city of Fall River and the town of Westport more desirable places to live and incubators for economic growth and prosperity. One of the primary qualities companies look at when considering setting up shop is the quality of the schools. The schools educate the people who will work for our businesses, and will provide a steady stream of well educated workers who can find good jobs in our communities.

There are many places where you can learn about each project, including [www.DurfeeRising.com](http://www.DurfeeRising.com) and the Westport School Building Committee web site at <http://westportsbc.com>. The Westport SOS -Save Our Schools Facebook page and the Durfee Rising Facebook page are also great resources. Read about the prudent fiscal decisions that have been made, and why kicking the can down the road is an expensive and foolish option.

Those who live in these communities have some skin in the game to make these projects happen. In late winter, Westport (February 27, 2018) and Fall River (likely in March 2018), each school project will go before its community to vote to approve the funding. Voting “no” doesn’t mean these projects are off the table – the state agreed that these were two of 90 percent more that needed doing now. It does mean, however, that some other district gets “our” money. We go to the back of the line for MSBA funding maybe sometime in the future. And any future renovation or construction will be totally on the taxpayers of the town.

It is the best of times in our region, where Other Money (from the Massachusetts School Building Authority) will make possible an educational and community hub that will serve each community for decades to come. This is our chance to grasp these opportunities and leap ahead – because our communities are worth this.

*Sally Chapman Cameron is a member of the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce Education Committee*