Improving the School Development Process in Cabarrus County, NC: A Cooperative Effort

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School facilities are the most expensive public facilities provided by state and local government in North Carolina. School facilities are also one of our greatest physical assets in that they can become centers of activity for the communities surrounding them. Unfortunately, bottom line costs for land tend to be the driving force in school development rather than the positive and negative implications that the location of school facilities can have on an area. This article provides some background to the school location and development issue and describes action taken in Cabarrus County to improve the process.

School facilities are the most expensive public facilities provided by state and local government in North Carolina. They can become activity centers and grand landmarks for the communities surrounding them. This activity can benefit the surrounding community, but it is particularly important for the health of schoolchildren. The safety of these children is also a public health concern, as they travel to and from the site. In light of its importance, both public health and planning professionals should assert their roles in the process of school development.

Most school districts in North Carolina do not retain a planner on their staffs. Many times, construction managers or school boards make decisions concerning location and site design, although their top priority is not to plan, but to build a facility or teach children. Many of North Carolina’s metropolitan areas cannot build schools fast enough to handle the influx of new children moving into the area, and this haste reduces the concern for proper site selection. However, the school districts are not solely to blame for sometimes poor location decisions. Municipal and county governments must participate in the school development process, to ensure that school facilities become building blocks to livable communities.

For the past several years, the Cabarrus County Government and the Cabarrus County and Kannapolis School Districts have forged partnerships to deal with ever expanding school facility needs. While the relationship has not been free of mistakes, this collaborative effort has sparked a discussion on the role of public health and planning school development decisions. Through a recent debate about how much funding was needed for the next round of school construction, county staff raised the issue of school location and development and its impact on cost—not just bottom-line cost to build a given facility but overall costs to the community. Of particular concern was the resulting scarcity of resources for necessary public services like bus transportation.

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road improvements, public safety equipment, and facilities.

Out of this discussion evolved the “Guiding Principles for School Development,” which include the following four principles to guide policy for school development:

1. Site Location
2. Site Design
3. Learning Environments in Schools
4. Implementation Principles

Many of the general principles discussed were ideas and findings from “Good Schools — Good Neighborhoods: The Impacts of State and Local School Board Policies on the Design and Location of Schools in North Carolina.” The committee expanded these ideas to be more specific to Cabarrus County’s physical and political environment. The following four sections describe the guidelines related to each of the principles above.

Site Location

Municipalities should locate schools in areas served by existing public facilities that would provide amenities for existing communities. Following this guideline ensures that school placement does not encourage growth in locations where government agencies are not prepared to provide necessary services. This also encourages schools to serve as multiuse community centers.

Location principles promote pedestrian friendly sites that can encourage a healthy environment and active behavior. Sites adjacent to older communities or within new developments are ideal, and preferably should either connect to an existing sidewalk network or locate near planned or developed greenways. While the principles correctly stress the need for pedestrian friendly street designs and crossing guards, they also recognize the reality that high school students can and will drive. With this in mind, high schools should be placed on facilities that can accommodate more automobile traffic without sacrificing pedestrian safety. Finally, site selection should facilitate school trips made by foot or bicycle.

To further enhance these benefits to public health, school facilities should be situated as community focal points. In mixed-use areas, school facilities should be placed within activity centers rather than on less valuable land in less accessible areas of the development. Additionally, schools should serve in a multi-use capacity as parks, recreation centers, and an after-hours library or night school for our community college system. This recommendation recognizes that school facilities are too expensive to keep closed after-hours and utilizes these facilities for positive community interaction. Finally, sites should be chosen in areas capable of supporting growth or as a means to revitalize declining or threatened neighborhoods. School locations should not spur new growth by extending utility infrastructure; rather school sites can be used to enhance older areas that may need new investment.

Site Design

In terms of principles for the actual site design, schools should be easily and safely accessible to all modes of

Above: Rather than placing Mount Pleasant High School in the Town of Mount Pleasant, the school was placed a few miles west of town. Unfortunately, no one can walk or bike to the facility given its location in a rural setting; a better location might have been closer to town. Photo courtesy of Rodger Lentz.
transportation, and in particular they should be pedestrian-friendly. Designs can enhance the streetscape while utilizing smaller parcel sizes and protecting the environment. This guideline has several beneficial effects including: enhancing public health through increasing walkability, reducing overall land acquisition and development costs, and removing less land from the tax base. As a contrast to these new principles, however, current school designs in Cabarrus County are suburban in nature. Large setbacks, sprawling one story school designs, and long on-site automobile stacking requirements waste land that costs between $30,000 and $50,000 or more per acre. While the County and many municipalities have been asking or requiring commercial development to meet certain architectural standards, schools have not been asked to meet such standards; this needs to change.

Building on these recommendations, the final proposal related to this principle involves the use of affordable green building techniques, a strategy critical to air quality and public health. Simple green solutions include using landscape materials that require less watering, low-water toilets, and low-impact techniques for handling and treating stormwater runoff. Benefits include reduced utility bills, lower grounds maintenance costs, and enhanced safety (by eliminating stormwater ponds).

Learning Environments in Schools

The learning environment should take advantage of the physical environment as a learning tool. When there are natural features such as wetlands, creeks, or forested areas, preserve them for use as an outdoor classroom. Furthermore, the built environment can illustrate the importance of good design for communities. Finally, schools should be adaptable structures and their facilities should not become throw-away buildings after one generation. Instead, building design should be flexible so these structures can be converted to new uses. If left to linger, many abandoned schools can become public health and safety hazards.

Implementation Principles

Each party—municipal and county governments as well as each school board—must understand its role and responsibilities in the school planning process and its connection to public health. All agencies with an
interest in school facility decisions should be provided an opportunity to participate in the design process and be provided an opportunity to voice concerns. Also, a predictable and repeatable process eases the decision making process among staff and elected officials.

The implementation principle first recognizes that “inter-local” agreements and ordinances may be needed for the ideas discussed previously to be fully implemented. Inter-local agreements would be useful to ensure that:

1. Each jurisdiction is provided an opportunity to participate in the school planning process
2. Development-approving agencies share data so each school system can develop accurate long-range facility plans and make good school location choices to serve growing communities
3. Each party knows its responsibility in the site selection and construction process (Cabarrus County school staff recently completed — and the school board endorsed — a project development process)
4. Development approvals are tied to the community’s ability to provide a sufficient number of school seats
5. Procedures and responsibilities for non-school use of school facilities are defined and that the process for reserving the use of a facility is user-friendly

In addition to inter-local agreements, a school siting ordinance would be valuable to ensure that future boards use these principles in their site selection and school development process.

Lastly, this implementation principle acknowledges the close tie between school boards and county commissions in North Carolina. These groups can communicate better by establishing regular work sessions and, when appropriate, inviting municipal boards and staff to participate. Through better communication, fewer surprises should arise during the planning, budgeting, and school development process and will prove helpful in raising and addressing public health concerns.

Results in Cabarrus County

In June 2004, the Community Committee on Education Capital Planning and Financing adopted the “Guiding Principles for School Development.” The $98 million bond package the committee recommended passed in the November 2004 election. In the time since its adoption and the community’s endorsement of new school construction funding, County planning and County school staffs have been using these principles to locate sites for three elementary schools and one high school.

The high school was the first priority of the school system and the first test of the principles. The search encompassed land adjacent to Harrisburg and areas that were south of town but not served by urban facilities. The selection process used land use, recreation, greenway, and transportation plans to assist with the selection process. Despite lower land costs in areas well outside of town, the school board selected (and the County Board of Commissioners agreed to purchase) a site adjacent to the town.

Overall, they selected the best available site for the high school in the Harrisburg area, one that addressed many public health concerns such as air quality, walkability, and pedestrian safety. The location sits on an identified greenway for which the town has obtained easements and lies near several existing and approved subdivisions with access to the greenway. Part of the land purchased for the school includes floodplain areas that will be used for a linear park so the planned greenway corridor can become an even greater natural asset for the town and county. The site is also on a planned major collector street that the school will partially construct and that the town will consider completing once it has enough funds. All three of the elementary school sites have been selected. Two of the sites are located within
new subdivisions. One of these is adjacent to a middle school that was built on a donated site. Similar to Harrisburg’s high school, a planned greenway corridor will run nearby. The third will abut a high school and middle school campus. In the future, improvements will be made to integrate the schools more fully into the developments with significant benefits to physical activity and public health.

**Conclusion**

The results, so far, point to success. With additional time for planning and site design, the process can and will be improved. One consideration is to secure funding for land purchases now. By purchasing sites prior to the next round of funding (in 2007), school sites with secured land can have their site planning prior to any architectural design. In doing so, community involvement should improve, and participants and planners can incorporate more of the site design principles into the design of each new and remodeled school facility.

**Endnotes**

1. 2004 North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile, page 42, www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/stats. Public school expenditures were 42.5 percent of North Carolina’s general fund expenditures during the 2002-2003 fiscal year. The next closest expenditure was for human resources at 25.1 percent of the general fund.


3. The author is simply indicating here that educators and construction managers have their plate full with trying to build enough quality school buildings to take care of a growing school population. That should continue to be their primary focus. It is local planners and other government officials who should involve themselves in school planning issues to ensure that schools become building blocks to better communities.


6. Walkable Communities, Inc. suggests 40 percent as a goal for walking and bike trips to schools.

7. Cabarrus County has been building school parks for several years. These facilities are mainly enhanced athletic facilities for youth athletic leagues. In the future, additional land could be acquired for development of passive recreation facilities to serve as outdoor classroom areas.