

Appendix C.

Planning for Schools & Livable Communities – The Oregon School Siting Handbook - Recommendations

Recommendations

Recognizing that there are challenges involved in siting schools, what specific actions can school districts and cities take to facilitate better siting decisions? The recommendations that follow suggest ways to turn challenges into opportunities and select school sites that are consistent with the guiding principles listed in this handbook.



School Siting Decisions Benefit the Entire Community



“Get a headstart. Long range planning is the key. Do it before there is pressure to build. This way you can be more systematic about it and make more rational decisions.”

– Steve Barrett
Assistant Superintendent
Springfield School District

Develop a school facilities plan.

State law requires communities with “fast growing” school districts to work with the district to develop facilities plans. Districts, even those with declining enrollments, should create a school facilities plan that anticipates need for the next 10 – 20 years. Plans that involve local governments and the community in the planning process will be more successful. The process of planning helps districts understand municipal policies and regulations; but more importantly, it helps the district communicate a vision to residents (and voters) that has multiple benefits. Periodic plan updates will ensure the plan remains responsive to changing conditions in the community. Districts should make sure that the planning process is well-informed by creative ideas and good information, not simply a review of stale school siting concepts.

Include schools districts in comprehensive land use plans.

State law requires coordination between governments during land use planning processes. Coordination, as it is currently implemented by most cities, is ineffective in addressing school districts’ issues. School districts should be involved in the comprehensive planning process to ensure that the needs of the districts are articulated in the land use plan and implementing ordinances. This involvement provides opportunities to develop and agree upon criteria for siting new schools on new sites as well as siting new schools in previously developed areas. In short, good comprehensive plans can provide multiple benefits to both the city and the school district.

Streamline the permitting process.

School districts should work proactively with the city to reduce complications in the permitting process. They should acknowledge that certain city codes/regulations (i.e., height, setbacks, parking) may prohibit the school district from designing cutting edge schools. Clear communication can proactively identify issues and lead to creative solutions.

Develop intergovernmental agreements.

Such agreements are common between cities and service providers. Intergovernmental agreements clarify roles and responsibilities regarding land use and school facilities planning—including how to define responsibilities, share information, and resolve disagreements. Beaverton School District uses intergovernmental agreements with the Tualatin Hills Parks and Recreation District to define maintenance responsibilities and field use (normally the recreation district maintains the fields located at schools in return for after-school use).

Involve the community.

School districts should include the community in school siting decisions. Good community involvement will initiate a sustained, informed dialogue about issues. Moreover, it provides districts a way to communicate to residents and voters that school siting is a necessary element of a good educational program.

“Don’t make assumptions that everyone supports schools. If you do not reach out to everyone, you will not gain support.”

*– Judy Delahunt
Superintendent
Redmond School District*

Oregon School Siting Forum, 2004



The School Site Takes Full Advantage of Existing Resources

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“With the budget strapped for everyone, it makes sense to get creative.”

*- Rebecca Gershow
Willamalane Parks and
Recreation District*

Renovate and expand existing schools.

Where possible, districts should consider renovating or rebuilding schools on sites that have anchored neighborhoods for decades and to which students already can walk or bike. They should recognize that it is just as important to preserve, maintain, and renovate existing buildings as it is to build well-designed, well-located new ones. Working with architects and engineers who are familiar with school renovation practices is also valuable.

Select sites that can be served by existing infrastructure.

Infrastructure costs can add tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars of cost to the development of a school. Selecting sites near existing infrastructure has an obvious benefit: school districts can share infrastructure costs with nearby development. Districts can accomplish this by consulting the local planning office when identifying appropriate sites. Planning staff can help assess the costs and benefits of different sites—as well as identify key development issues.

Establish mechanisms for cooperative agreements.

Such agreements facilitate the shared use of facilities between schools and the local government. Districts should consider the full range of joint use possibilities including parks, recreation facilities, health clinics, elderly facilities, parking, public transportation, and others. The City of Eugene and Eugene 4J School District have developed a successful parking arrangement in which staff of the city-run pool can park in the lot of the adjacent school during the summer.

3 The School Site Is Easily and Safely Accessible by Walking, Biking, and Transit

Locate schools close to students.

Proximity is key. Schools must be close enough to the neighborhoods they serve for students to walk or bike to school. This is a basic, and yet extremely important concept. Increasing the number of students who live within walking/biking distance will increase the percentage of students who actually walk or bike to school.

Develop pedestrian facilities on the school site.

Even casual observation reveals that many schools have inadequate pedestrian facilities. Districts should use the following strategies to improve pedestrian access:

- Use the expertise of creative urban designers, transportation planners traffic/transportation engineers. Solicit advice from these groups early in the siting process. It is much easier for them to give advice about potential problems than to fix problems once the school is built/renovated.
- Provide for good pedestrian and bicycle access. Design the school site to promote walking and biking to school and reduce pedestrian/vehicle conflicts; place bike racks near entrances; designate pedestrian paths that are separate from automobile pick-up and drop-off zones; provide safety crossings and crossing guards.
- Create a “Safe Routes to Schools” campaign. Work with city staff, school staff, parents, law enforcement officers, and health care professionals to develop a “Safe Routes to School” campaign to address school-related transportation.
- Set up a student escort system. Work with school staff and parents to develop a system for organizing children to walk/bike to and from school in groups. Commuter Solutions in Eugene is working with local schools to develop escort systems in which parents take turns walking a group of students to school.

“If we want more children to walk to school, then it is imperative that we actually build routes to school. Although this sounds intuitive, the current preference for building neighborhoods with cul-de-sacs and collector streets actually creates barriers for kids to get to school.”

*– Marc Schlossberg, Ph.D.
University of Oregon*

For more information:

Safe Routes to School
www.bikewalk.org/safe_routes_to_school/SR2S_introduction.htm

Smart Ways to School Program
www.ltd.org/sws/index.htm

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Create a well-connected pedestrian and street network in the area/neighborhood around the school.

“School districts should work more closely with the city or county road authority much earlier in the process.”

– Deborah Hogan
City of Bend

- **Address the transportation infrastructure around schools.** Make sure there are good connections between the school and nearby neighborhoods by creating pedestrian plans to integrate schools with the community. Work with schools to develop traffic calming devices, sidewalks, and pedestrian infrastructure.
- **Develop a well-connected street system around the school.** The school can provide bike racks and crossing guards, but if the area around the school is not conducive to walking, students will be less likely to walk or bike to school. The streets in the neighborhood around the school should connect to each other, allowing students to easily and directly get to school.
- **Locate schools away from hazardous traffic conditions.** Railroads and major streets such as arterials are dangerous to cross. Locating schools away from these impediments makes the schools easier to access by walking and biking.
- **Remove policy barriers.** Review the comprehensive land use plan, zoning ordinance, and functional plans to identify barriers such as excessive parking, setback, and landscaping requirements.
- **Integrate school transportation into the Transportation Systems Plan.** Most Transportation System Plans include detailed analysis of transportation needs and identify projects to meet those needs. Few address school transportation issues. One strategy is to include school transportation in regional transportation planning discussions. Such a discussion will inevitably involve potential school sites. Acknowledge that school transportation systems (i.e., school buses) are an effective form of public transportation that are largely ignored by land use and transportation planners. Work to integrate school busing into the larger discussion of transportation options.

The School Site Is a Community Focal Point

Consider small sites and multi-level schools.

Districts should select sites that can be incorporated into the neighborhood instead of sites that isolate the school from the community it serves. An excessively large site may reduce siting options, eliminate transportation choices, and foreclose the possibility of the school serving as a center of community. By using creative design, schools can be multi-level, thereby requiring less land and making it easier to integrate them into the neighborhood.

Involve your architect early in the process.

Districts should choose an architect who is familiar with creative school design. He/she may have good solutions for difficult site challenges. If school renovations are an option, be sure to select an architect who is experienced in working with older buildings. Twenty years ago architects were more involved in the entire school siting process, but now, according to an architect specializing in schools, “the norm is for school districts to come to the architect with either one or a few sites.” Involving the architect earlier would allow him or her to work with the site selection committee to identify potential sites.

Integrate schools into the community.

Districts should begin by connecting the school to the surrounding neighborhood. Key strategies include: (1) removing barriers such as fences around school/playing fields. If fences are a security issue, include several gates so that people have free access to the school and associated facilities; (2) using trails, sidewalks, or bike paths to connect neighborhoods to the school; and (3) controlling auto access and parking so it does not create safety conflicts with pedestrian and bicycle access. The Witch Hazel Community Plan (Hillsboro, OR) requires the developer to build walking paths/sidewalks from the surrounding housing development to the school to facilitate better pedestrian connections.

“Start with schools as a principle planning objective. Cities should think - How can we help schools operate?”

*- Jack Orchard
land use lawyer*

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“The City must understand the district’s needs and suggest acquisition opportunities.”

– Wink Brooks
Hillsboro City Planner

Be proactive about identifying sites.

A well-sited school can turn a subdivision into a neighborhood. The fact that the district may not have a pool of capital for site acquisition does not preclude identifying and evaluating potential school sites. Consider the following strategies:

- **Land banking.** By acquiring land before it is needed to build schools, districts and cities add certainty to the development process and allow better integration of schools into neighborhood. The Hillsboro School District has tried to get ahead of demand – each bond measure includes money to purchase land and replace land in the land bank.
- **Developer set-asides.** Identify school locations when meeting with developers and encourage school sites that integrate with the design of new developments. Encourage developers to dedicate or sell land for school sites as part of the entitlement process. Make sure that the site supports city planning goals. Be wary of donated sites whose location could undercut community preservation goals and force taxpayers to pay for unnecessarily expensive infrastructure, transportation, and other services.
- **Community education.** Begin by partnering with the city to raise awareness among residents about the importance of planning for schools in the future. Both the Bethel and Redmond School Districts attribute successfully passing bonds to involving the community in the process. Strategies included holding community meetings, producing print and television advertisements, canvassing door to door, and developing a large volunteer base.

Establish design and site standards for schools.

Working in partnership, school districts and cities should establish design and site standards for schools and school sites. Address the following issues:

- Size of sites (large enough to meet educational program needs, but small enough to fit easily and gracefully into the neighborhood served)
- Location of sites within the community
- Connectivity, bicycle and pedestrian standards
- Safety standards (including street design and speed)
- School design (encourage neighborhood pride in the school)

Steps for a Coordinated School Siting Process

Local governments and school districts that coordinate with each other about school location have an easier time in the siting process and make better site decisions. The following three steps serve as a guide for school districts and cities/counties. They are written from the perspective of the school district because districts normally initiate the process and ultimately will make decisions about where to build new schools or renovate existing ones. Each school district will follow a slightly different process for siting schools depending on the size of the district, the political climate of the community, the capacity of the school district and local jurisdiction.



Step 1

Determine What You Have & Articulate Need and Vision

How Can the City or County be Involved?

The city/county usually does not have a large role in the school district inventory; however, it plays a role in helping the district determine need by providing information on growth. The city/county should answer the following questions for the school district:

- What are the future growth projections?
- Where should growth occur?
- Where are transportation infrastructure improvements planned?
- What is the land use pattern within the city?
- Are new parks or other public facilities going to be built in the near future?
- What building codes pertain to schools?
- What does the comprehensive plan say about schools?
- Where does the city/county allow schools?
- How does the city/county envision its role in the school siting process?
- Are school planners and city planners using the same demographic and infrastructure data?
- Is the city/county interested in pursuing joint use opportunities such as development and maintenance of park and recreation facilities?

Why?

Determining the number and quality of school district facilities and having a good understanding of city/county growth patterns are important first steps in establishing the district's needs. This "needs statement" provides the rationale for the siting process. (For example, we have enough room for 20 more students and the city is expecting 200 more students in the next 5-7 years. We will need school capacity to accommodate 180 more students by 2010.) Instead of immediately trying to solve the problem, the school district should develop a vision for the siting process. How does it want the process to run? What does it want the end result to be?

Who?

Many school districts develop an Advisory/Steering/Project Committee for the site selection process that is responsible for making key decisions (see Step 2). The Advisory Committee may decide to hire a consultant to perform many of the tasks or may take on the tasks themselves.

How?

- 1) Complete an inventory of school facilities and district owned sites, documenting maintenance needs and capacity.
- 2) Understand community growth patterns and regulations; ask city/county personnel key questions.
- 3) Develop population projections for school aged children ; make sure that the projections coincide with those used by the city/ county.
- 4) Define the need based on background research (inventory, growth patterns, etc.).
- 5) Develop a vision for the school siting process.

Step 2

Identify Stakeholders and Engage the Community

Why?

Involving the community in the siting process can have short-term and long-term benefits for the school district and local government. If the community is involved and listened to, the school site and design will better meet its needs and be responsive to its desires. Community members/agencies may have ideas that the school district did not originally consider that could maximize resources and better integrate the school into the community. If satisfied with the process and product, residents may be more likely to vote for the next bond measure and stay involved with the school and community.

Who?

Consider involving the following types of people in Advisory Committee or in other public involvement activities:

- School District Personnel (superintendent, school facility planners, school transportation officers)
- City and/or county planners
- Transportation planners
- Architects
- Transportation engineers
- Historic preservation planners
- Park and recreation planners
- Youth organizers
- Parents
- Developers
- Students
- Public health advocates
- Neighborhood association members
- Public relations specialists
- Business Owners
- Nonprofit Personnel (YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Club, Senior Services)

How?

There are a number of ways to involve the public in the siting process. School districts will need to think strategically about the appropriate activities for and duration of their involvement. Examples include:

- Siting Advisory Committee
- Citizen Oversight Committee
- Design workshops
- Open houses
- Newsletters, brochures
- Surveys

How Can the City or County be Involved?

Many communities recommend having a city/county planner participate in the Siting Advisory Committee. This person can help the committee navigate through what can be a challenging labyrinth of city/county ordinances and regulations. City/county representatives should plan on attending design workshops and focus group sessions to contribute to the process and to listen to what the school district and the community values.

Step 3

Identify, Evaluate, and Select Sites

How Can the City or County be Involved?

City/county planning staff can assist in three specific ways:

- **Point out areas of potential population growth and/or decline:** Cities are required to plan for the next 20 years. Discussing the jurisdiction's long-range plans will help school districts know where to secure land for the future.
- **Identify vacant parcels and discuss attributes:** Most communities have an up-to-date computer database of vacant land that describes important parcel characteristics, such as size of site, type of zoning, presence of wetlands or environmentally sensitive areas, and floodplains. Access to this data streamlines and better informs the process.
- **Discuss joint use potentials or important adjacencies:** If asked, the city may jointly purchase land with the school district to co-locate facilities such as a park or community center. City officials should also discuss with the school district the overall vision for the community and identify how schools contribute to that vision through strategic planning.

Why?

Conducting an inventory of viable sites (including renovation/expansion of existing sites) ensures that all options are considered. Some districts may only have one or two sites to choose from; however, when there are several sites, a set of evaluating criteria is helpful in making decisions.

Who?

School Siting Advisory Committee, city/county personnel, if not on advisory committee.

How?

Consider the following criteria when choosing a school site:

Land Use

- Renovation/expansion potential
- Land use compatibility
- Proximity to future development
- Proximity to community facilities
- Site availability
- Size of site
- Proximity to students
- Reuse of infrastructure

Costs

- Land costs
- Construction costs
- Site maintenance costs
- Off-site costs

Transportation/Accessibility

- Pedestrian and bicycle accessibility
- Availability of parking
- Vehicular access to site
- Drop-off and pick-up traffic loads

Environmental

- Presence of wetlands or endangered species
- Suitable soil types
- Vulnerability to natural hazards
- Presence of hazardous substances
- Topography