

School Buildings and Community Building

By Timothy Torma

In October 2005, a headline in the *Arizona Republic* read: “No Students Attend Tombstone School.”¹ The article provided a lesson in the many potential pitfalls of school planning conducted in isolation from community planning.

The new high school in Tombstone, Arizona, could not accept new students because the unpaved road leading to it was considered unsafe for school buses. Located on a 57-acre site in the desert miles from the town it served, the school sat empty while local school officials tried to find funding to pave the road. The project was already over budget, due in part to the fact that there were no gas, electric, or fiber-optic lines to the site, situated three miles north of Tombstone.

This is an extreme but instructive example of a problem common in jurisdictions across the country—inadequate communication and coordination between school districts and local governments. Some state and local governments have recognized this problem and put policies and procedures in place to address it. But in other communities, the problem persists, often exacerbated by state and local rules and policies.

School Spending—What is it Buying?

Investments in educational facilities represent one of the largest capital outlays many local governments make. Over the next few decades, thousands of schools will be built or renovated across the country. Decisions about the construction and renovation of these schools will have important implications for their communities—planning commissioners should understand and care about how these decisions are made. Do you know where school spending will happen in your community over the next 20 years? If not, you might want to look into it. If you do know, does the spending support the broader goals and vision of your community or is it working against them?

Schools are often exempt from local zoning regulations. In some places decisions about whether to build a new building or renovate an older structure, as well as where to build schools, are made by school officials independent of planning departments or other local government influence. While school districts should take the lead on school siting, it should



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Inappropriate planning for schools leads to unsafe conditions for walking and bicycling students, unnecessary vehicle trips to transport students, and severe traffic congestion, as illustrated at this Virginia school.

not do so without input from the rest of the government. To do otherwise is often a recipe for a bad investment.

A first-rate education is the primary consideration in school facility decisions, but progressive and forward-thinking communities and planning commissioners are achieving multiple goals—educational, health, environmental, economic, social, and fiscal—with these investments. No town has the wealth to make such large expenditures without maximizing the returns to the entire community.

National trends in school siting and size over the last several decades paint a disturbing picture for places trying to build healthier communities and control sprawl on improved land. Average school size has grown steadily; new schools increasingly locate on large, distant sites. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of schools in the United States decreased from 262,000 in 1930 to 95,000 in 2004. Student population over the same time period has rose from 28 million to 54.5 million.²



Carolyn Tomma

Neighborhood schools encourage walking and decrease reliance on transportation by bus and car.

Policies may favor the construction of new schools rather than renovation or expansion of existing ones. Guidelines, recommendations, and standards that encourage communities to build large schools on new campuses are embedded in regulations, policies, and laws at the state and local levels. Many states have school construction funding formulas that favor new construction over renovation. Such formulas typically establish a limit on what a district may spend to renovate rather than build new, usually a specific percentage of new construction costs. Other common policies favoring large, new schools are “minimum acreage standards.” These policies—used at both the state and local levels—dictate large, new campuses, and discourage continued use of smaller, existing schools.

Supersize Me?

The trend towards giant schools continues despite widespread agreement among researchers that the scale of most U.S. schools is too large.³ A growing body of research shows that “student achievement in small schools is at least equal and often superior to achievement in large schools.”⁴ A higher percentage of students, across all socioeconomic levels, are successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities.⁵ Females, nonwhites, and special-needs students, whether at-risk, gifted, exceptional, or disadvantaged, are all better served by small schools.⁶ Security improves and violence decreases in smaller schools, as does student alcohol and drug abuse.⁷

The argument that larger schools lead to economic savings has also been questioned. In a 1998 review of research literature on the effectiveness of small schools, Mary Anne Raywid of Hofstra University concluded, “When viewed on a cost-per-student-enrolled basis, they [small schools] are somewhat more expensive. But when examined on the basis of the number of students they graduate, they are less expensive than either medium-sized or large high schools.”⁸

The mounting evidence of superiority of smaller schools for educational and behavioral outcomes has led to a growing movement among educators for smaller, more “community-centered” schools. While such efforts are finding success in many places, the majority of new schools still reflect the trends of the past several decades and are in the opposite direction.

This is Where Planning Commissioners Come into Play

As more and more communities move to reverse this trend, planning commissions can play an important role. This issue is a coalition waiting to be formed. Natural allies abound. In addition to educators who favor smaller schools, citizens and groups organized around a wide range of issues including the environment, health/obesity/physical activity, historic preservation, community development, and smart growth should prove to be willing partners in

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Minimum Acreage Standards for Schools

Size and location matter when creating community-centered schools. In an effort to gain a clearer picture of the role minimum acreage standards play in school siting, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency asked the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI) to research state minimum acreage requirements in 2003. The research showed that 27 states had some form of minimum site size policy or regulation for schools, with a wide range of specified sizes. However, many states are rethinking this approach. Since 2003, for example, South Carolina, Rhode Island, and Maine have eliminated minimum acreage requirements.

In addition, the 2004 revision of CEFPI’s influential *Guide for Planning Educational Facilities* no longer contains minimum acreage recommendations for school sites. Recognizing that a “one-size-fits-all” approach is dated and can work counter to a variety of goals, the new guide encourages communities to analyze their needs in order to make appropriate siting decisions.

Maine now has mandated maximum site sizes—if a school district builds on a site exceeding the maximum, the state will not fund the purchase of the excess land; the school district will have to pay for it. For a listing of state policies governing school site size, see: www.cefpi.org/pdf/state_guidelines.pdf.

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any effort that could result in better education investments. Working with these coalitions, planning commissions can influence school planning.

But coalitions don't just materialize from thin air. Someone has to make the first move. In 2002, the Funders Network for Smart Growth commissioned a white paper titled "Reversing School Sprawl for Better Schools and Communities." The author, Sam Passmore, concluded that, "To date, efforts that deliberately link . . . small schools and smart growth . . . are scattered, but they are growing in number, geographic scope and promise." He also adds a cautionary note: "The fact that a shared interest exists doesn't

automatically mean that it will be exploited. To make the most of this important opportunity for collaboration, the key stakeholders will need to work over time to develop a common agenda that benefits school children, their parents, educators and the community at large."

Transportation: An Issue that Could Get You a Seat at the Table?

Not surprisingly, EPA and other researchers have found that school siting and design can affect traffic congestion, air pollution, and school transportation budgets. Travel to school represents a significant portion of

Safe Routes to School

Deb Hubsmith

Safe Routes to School (SRTS) is an international movement to make it safe, convenient, and fun for children to walk and bicycle to schools. The program addresses critical issues related to children's health, traffic congestion, public safety, and the environment, as well as the design of our communities.

When Congress passed the 2005 federal transportation bill (known as SAFETEA-LU), a total of \$612 million was authorized for all 50 states and the District of Columbia to develop safe routes programs. Federal safe routes to school grants are available through state Departments of Transportation (DOTs) to build safer access to schools and to run education and encouragement programs that promote safe walking and bicycling.

Safe Routes to School is an important movement because:

- In 1969 approximately 50 percent of U.S. children walked or biked to schools; today only about 15 percent walk or bike.
- Childhood obesity has tripled in the past 30 years.
- Parents driving children to schools comprise between 20 and 30 percent of morning rush-hour traffic.

The federal funding extends through September 2009. Each DOT has a designated coordinator who runs that state's SRTS grant and outreach programs. Funds can be used for infrastructure projects, such as sidewalks or medians, and noninfrastructure activities, such as education and planning.

Planning commissioners take notice: Usually the applicants for safe routes infrastructure funds are cities and counties, as these entities have jurisdiction over the public right-of-way.

Safe routes programs are built on collaborative partnerships among elected officials, city planners, engineers, police officers, school personnel, parents, students, nonprofit organizations, and other community leaders. While safe routes programs are unique to the particular community in which they operate, the most successful programs bring together community stakeholders to create a "team" that devises a location-specific program to integrate the 5 Es for safe routes to school: evaluation, engineering, education, encouragement, and enforcement.

A first step for creating a local safe routes program is forming a team and developing a plan for how to address the five Es. Here is a description of each:

- **Evaluation:** Assessing neighborhood conditions to determine needs, surveying parents and students, and measuring "before" and "after" numbers annually to determine the effectiveness of efforts to increase bicycling and walking.
- **Education:** Teaching parents and students about safe bicycling, walking, and driving.
- **Encouragement:** Promoting special events and contests to encourage children and their families to walk and bike to school.
- **Engineering:** Building infrastructure such as crosswalks, multiuse pathways, bike lanes, sidewalks, intersection improvements, and traffic calming.

- **Enforcement:** Ensuring people obey traffic laws, such as yielding to pedestrians and adhering to speed limits.

With a prioritized plan in place, cities and schools can seek funding through their state DOT. They may also consider how safe routes goals can be met through other funding sources and programs. Many cities are creating safe routes using general funds to improve signage and striping around schools. Cities can use existing police personnel to patrol routes to school or improve maintenance of pathways. Safe routes campaigns can be integral part of the school's PTA or wellness council. Other cities are launching "complete streets" efforts to ensure that roadways include the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians.

The new safe routes to school funding provides a golden opportunity for planning commissioners to help lead efforts to build collaborations with school boards, education professionals, and parents. The goal is to make communities safe and convenient for children to walk and bicycle to school. Safe Routes to School programs can be a catalyst for achieving long-term goals related to community involvement, active transportation, decreased traffic congestion, and improved air quality. With cities and schools working together for the health and future of our children, we create more livable communities with happier and healthier residents.

morning rush hour car trips in many areas. Chauffeur children to school often results in two vehicle trips or four additional trips per day. This has implications for children's health, traffic congestion, and air quality. It may also give planning commissioners a foot in the door to the school planning conversation.

In some jurisdictions, active collaborations between local governments and school districts have evolved to address issues related to school transportation. In Arlington County, Virginia, the School Board recently directed the Superintendent to ensure that transportation issues, including parking and transportation demand management, are considered as part of the facility design process. This action was a result of discussions and collaboration between members of the school board and members of the Planning and Transportation Commissions. The Master Transportation Plan includes the following objective:

“Achieve a 50 percent walk/bike to school rate among Arlington County students within the areas where bus transportation is not provided, thus improving traffic safety and reducing congestion around schools due to reduced numbers of children being delivered to school by private motor vehicle.”¹⁰

The plan also articulates approaches to achieve this objective and measure progress.

In addition, members of both the Planning and Transportation Commissions in Arlington are automatically included on every “Building Level Planning Committee,” a group that the school district forms to advise the school board on significant capital spending projects. Even in Arlington, there are still many opportunities for better coordination between the county and the school district, but these approaches have fostered more dialog between the school and county staff and resulted in better outcomes for the community.

In Summary

Remember the school in Tombstone, Arizona? Well, the school district finally came up with the funds to pave the road, but the saga continues. In a March 30, 2007 article, the *Tombstone Epitaph*¹¹ ran the headline: “Pleas for traffic light assistance go unheard.” Reporter Joyanna Jones wrote that Superintendent Ronald Hennings was trying to convince the state DOT to pay for a traffic signal off of Arizona Highway 80, a location Principal Robert Devere fears “may lead to a serious accident because of a combination of the center turn lane’s placement, a downhill slope and the speed limit.” Shocking. It’s shocking to discover this traffic problem!

Without assessing blame, most planning commissioners would probably agree that many of the problems encountered in the Tombstone case could have been avoided or alleviated by better communication and planning between the school district and local government before the site was purchased. If this communication is lacking in your community, you can lay the groundwork for improvement and make this one of the most effective actions you will take to improve your community over time. □

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Siting large new schools on remote campus settings results in pedestrian inaccessibility and the need for large parking lots. In this example in Minnesota, the school appears to have its own interstate ramp.

Resources

These documents and websites provide examples of research and other state and local practices that support smarter school siting and funding decisions.

- Led by the 21st Century School Fund, the Building Educational Successes Together collaboration has produced five policy papers on creating quality school facilities (Educational Outcomes, Community Planning, Schools as Centers of Community, Facilities Management, and Facilities Funding). These are available online at www.21csf.org/csrf%2Dhome.
- EPA has a webpage dedicated to smart growth and schools that contains a number of publications and weblinks. See: www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/schools.htm.
- Council of Educational Facility Planners International and EPA’s “Schools for Successful Communities: An Element of Smart Growth” describes policies and practices for supporting smart growth and community-centered schools and includes case studies. www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/SmartGrowth_schools_Pub.pdf
- National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities has resource lists with links, books, and journal articles on a variety of topics (smart growth, school siting, small schools, community use, etc.). www.edfacilities.org/rl/index.cfm
- The National Trust for Historic Preservation has numerous resources on school policies and state policies related to school construction, including “State Policies and School Facilities: How States Can Support or Undermine Neighborhood Schools and Community Preservation.” <http://nthp.org/issues/schools/index.html>.

More Resources for Safe Routes to School

Safe Routes to School National Partnership: www.saferoutespartnership.org

National Center for Safe Routes to School: www.saferoutesinfo.org

Federal Highway Administration: <http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/saferoutes>

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Endnotes

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