

# Wanted: schools close to home

## Rapid growth brings calls to build neighborhood facilities

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Around 8:15 a.m. each school day, students and their parents pad onto the grounds of Nolensville Elementary School on a walking path connected to their nearby neighborhood.

The path, also popular for scooters and bikes, is a source of pride for school and town officials who worked together to get funds for it.

About the same time the walkers are arriving, a line of cars forms, and school staffers wave their arms to coax parents along. Children know to exit their minivans quickly.

How many kids walk and how many ride buses and cars is just one consequence of school placement decisions that Middle Tennessee schools have been making rapidly. Williamson and Rutherford counties have led the way by opening 12 new schools since 2007, with more construction under way and scheduled.

The pace of building has increased the urgency of transportation, health, environmental and historic preservation groups seeking changes in where schools are built. They're pushing back against the trend of putting big schools on large land plots far from students' homes. Instead, they see long-term cost savings, health benefits and reduced burdens on infrastructure and roads if schools can be anchored to neighborhoods where more students can walk to them.

This month, the federal Environmental Protection Agency is due to release guidelines for school siting. A separate study of Tennessee's policies is in progress, and a Nashville-based planning group is calling attention to school placement.

"People underestimate the impact on traffic, air quality ... health," said Leslie Meehan, senior planner with the Nashville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, which covers seven counties.

Last year, the MPO hosted national experts and local officials to discuss long-term costs of school placements, with attention on how isolated schools strain infrastructure and reduce student health.

The MPO asked schools to consider transportation impacts on quality of life.

A survey found that pressure to build schools quickly doesn't encourage municipal and school officials to work together and that upfront construction costs overshadow other factors.

“At the symposium, the No. 1 thing they wanted was education for local school boards,” Meehan said.

The MPO is still hoping to get grants for school siting training.

Local district officials said intensive study already goes into finding suitable land, at reasonable cost, in areas that create diverse schools. The new thinking on school siting is sometimes out of touch with realities on the ground, they said.

Competing goals

In Williamson County, which added 800 students this year to crack the 32,000 mark, the search is on for land for a new high school in the northeast portion of the district.

Challenges start literally from the ground up, as officials encounter rocky terrain unsuitable for construction, said Jason Golden, chief operations officer for the district.

“If we can find (land) close to a neighborhood ... we’re going to try to do that, but sometimes we need to place a school in a centralized location,” Golden said.

He said the district has placed elementary schools closer to neighborhoods than middle and high schools, which need space for athletic fields.

He pointed to Pearre Creek Elementary, built on land set aside by the developer of a neighborhood, as an example of how a developer, county and school district can work together on school siting.

The district lists such partnerships as a goal, and it’s the sort of collaboration the MPO and the National Trust for Historic Preservation want to see more often, instead of the “turf battles” some MPO survey respondents cited.

Golden said he talks more than ever with county planners, since quarterly meetings were scheduled two years ago.

In Rutherford County, growth has been so rapid that typical building has been based on where people are, not where they may soon build homes, said Shane Morgan, boundary planning and enrollment coordinator.

Rutherford may open some isolated schools, but they are central in zones, he said.

“We’re answering the call of the community, regardless of where the construction is,” he said.

Gary Clardy, facilities planner for Rutherford County Schools, said it’s difficult to raise the priority of some goals, such as walkability, when the district is scrambling to get children out of portable classrooms.

“With 37,000 students, if you have 3 percent growth, that still gives you a school full of kids,” he said.

The school board has been approving projects that place elementary, middle and high schools together on large plots. The same construction plans are being used on multiple buildings.

The district counted 38,785 students around Labor Day, up 414 from the same day last year, and expects to move past 39,000 students this semester, a spokesman said.

“It’s been the board’s desire to give every student a seat in a school building, and not in a portable,” Clardy said. “That’s the main issue that Rutherford County has been dealing with for years.”

In Metro Nashville, zoning ordinances set acreage requirements for new schools. Facilities planner Joe Edgens advocates eliminating those rules, a move that would fit with some of the new thinking on school siting. The planning commission is considering the change, he said.

Looking long-range

Facilities planners and neighborhood schools advocates agree on one of the top challenges in school siting: accounting for costs and impact over the long life span of a building.

“It’s hard to sell something to commissions and school boards and taxpayers if you get out past the five- or seven-year payback,” Clardy said.

Addressing that challenge is a goal of Ashland City-based sustainable design consultant Edward Wansing, who presented at the MPO conference.

He said construction makes up just 2 percent of the cost of operating a school over its lifetime.

School siting may not be as visible as other efficiency and recycling projects that have gained in popularity. He also said he can see why a school board would go for cheaper land, perhaps farther from populations, if it allows funding for better equipment inside classrooms.

“I don’t think we’re really to that long-term picture of financial analysis yet,” Wansing said.

Meehan said last year’s conference led to many “aha” moments. What’s needed next are local case studies.

Nolensville Elementary, although somewhat isolated, shows how small communities can collaborate, said Vice Mayor Beth Lothers, who has helped develop a series of connective paths.

“It’s something that you literally have to do piece by piece,” she said, noting that officials “all have our territory ... but if we interface together, we can get so much more done.”

Even on a chilly, overcast morning last week, the faithful were out walking to school.

“We pass many people at the bus stop who look at us like we’re crazy,” said mother Missy Guthrie, who brings second-grader Maymie on a scooter and 3-year-old Madden on a tricycle exactly a mile from driveway to doorway. “I just hope I’m instilling in her a healthy lifestyle that she’ll carry on.”

Fellow parent Molly Wright, who came with 6-month-old Addie in a stroller and kindergartner Hank on foot, said the 10-minute walk gives her time to talk about the upcoming day.

“I love that we don’t have to get in the car,” she said. “I spend my whole life in the car.”

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