

Midstate counties planning for walkable schools

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NASHVILLE — Officials in Middle Tennessee are weighing the benefits of placing more new schools in neighborhoods where students could walk to classes.

The pace of building new schools has increased the urgency of the issue, according to The Tennessean. Williamson and Rutherford counties are leading the way in the Nashville area with new school construction. The counties have opened 12 since 2007 and more construction is under way and scheduled.

School siting guidelines are due to be released this month by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, and a study of Tennessee policies is under way.

Meanwhile, the Nashville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, which covers seven counties, is trying to call attention to the issue, saying isolated schools that require students to ride in buses or cars is a strain on infrastructure and isn't healthy for students.

"People underestimate the impact on traffic, air quality, health," said Leslie Meehan, a senior planner with the Nashville agency.

Local school district officials, however, say the new thinking on school placement isn't always feasible.

Williamson County

Jason Golden, chief operations officer for the school district in Williamson County, said the 800 students added this year brings the total population to about 32,000, and more land is being sought for new schools.

He said the district faces several challenges in finding a suitable location, include price and suitable terrain for construction.

"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 elementary schools are placed closer to neighborhoods than middle and high schools because the latter need more space for athletic fields.

As an example, he said Pearre Creek Elementary was built in a neighborhood on land that had been set aside by a developer just for that purpose.

The county also has Nolensville Elementary, which is located on a walking path that's connected to a nearby neighborhood.

Although it is somewhat isolated, city and school officials worked together to develop a series of connective paths allowing many students to walk.

Vice Mayor Beth Lothers said it shows how small communities can collaborate.

"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."

Rutherford County

The growth in Rutherford County has been so rapid that school officials are usually deciding a school's location based on where new homes are — not where they are planned, according to Shane Morgan, boundary planning and enrollment coordinator.

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

"We're answering the call of the community, regardless of where the construction is," he said.

Rutherford County Schools' facilities planner Gary Clardy said it's not easy to raise the priority of goals such as walkability when the district, which has more than 37,000 students, is still trying to get away from portable classrooms.

"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."

Metro Nashville

In Metro Nashville, there are currently zoning ordinances with acreage requirements for new schools. Facilities planner Joe Edgens said the planning commission is considering the elimination of those rules, which would fit with some of the new thinking on school siting.

On a recent morning in Nolensville, many parents were walking their children to school despite the cool temperatures and overcast skies.

Molly Wright said the 10-minute walk with her kindergartner and 6-month-old 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."