



## Nashville Area MPO School Siting Symposium Event Summary

January 19, 2010

### Symposium Summary

On January 19, 2010 over 100 participants of the Nashville Area MPO School Siting Symposium discussed ways in which school location affects how children get to school-- walking, biking, busing or driving -- and how travel choices have a major impact on child health, traffic congestion, air pollution, school district budgets, and quality-of-life in our region. Participants discussed with elected leaders, school administrators and school boards, plus various government departments, about the opportunity to build schools that better serve and support students, educators, parents, and communities. The inaugural Nashville Area School Siting Symposium offered strategies that our region might employ for locating schools in ways that benefit entire communities – moving beyond the “big box” method of acquiring land and facilities.

The Symposium was held at a historic neighborhood school that has been repurposed as a training facility. Participants included members of the public and private sectors with representation from various local, regional and state level offices of regional and community planning, education, engineering, school facilities and transportation planning, public health, school administration, planning and zoning commissions, elected officials, non-profits, parks, public works and historic preservation. Representatives from school district administration, school board members, and architects were also in attendance.

The Symposium began with opening remarks by Michael Skipper, Director of the Nashville Area MPO and MPO Executive Board Chair, Mayor Ernest Burgess of Rutherford County. Guest speakers included Dr. David Salvesen, a researcher on collaborative school planning and Deputy Director of the University of North Carolina (UNC) Center for Sustainable Community Design, as well as Matthew Dalbey from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Smart Growth Program. The Symposium included a panel discussion on school siting in Middle Tennessee and the national level, as well as presentations on local school siting examples. Conference breakout sessions included: School Siting and Health, School Siting and Transportation, School Siting and Green Building (LEED), School Siting and Historic Preservation, School Siting and Parks and Intergovernmental Collaboration and School Siting.

The symposium focused on opportunities for policy makers, transportation professionals, school board members and school facilities planners to work together on siting schools. School siting practices have an impact not only on the lives of children but on the community as well. The topic of school siting goes beyond discussion of simply locating a building, but looking at how a school can be an anchor to a community and can enhance the educational experience of students.

## Breakout Session Highlights

### **School Siting and Child Health**

- 10 of the most obese states are in the south, and many have counties with over 50% obesity and high rates of physical inactivity
- Overweight adolescents are 70% more likely to become overweight adults
- A child with an overweight parent is 80% more likely to become overweight
- In TN, students receive only 90 minutes of physical activity class time a week, and in many schools, walking to classrooms is counted toward this time
- Walking to and from school is associated with better child behavior, less absenteeism and better test scores

### **School Siting and Historic Preservation**

- Historic facilities can be preserved and adapted
- New uses for historic buildings include schools, community centers, assisted living units, lofts, art institutes, mixed-use and professional buildings
- Coalitions of interested parties including media and academic institutes are the best ways to help make sure that historic structures are preserved

### **School Siting and LEED-ND Certification**

- The greenest buildings are the ones already built
- Green Buildings save up to 50% energy over non-green schools
- Research shows an association between student health, test scores, air quality and natural light in schools
- School siting is a part of LEED application (21 of 40 points) and includes site selection, joint use of facilities, connectivity and non-motorized modes
- Very few LEED schools exist in Middle TN

### **School Siting and Intergovernmental Collaboration**

- City planners can initiate and facilitate discussion between departments and jurisdictions around school siting
- Planners can help the school board understand how schools fit into comprehensive plans and requests for subdivisions and zoning changes
- There is a need for different criteria for schools so they are not regarded as institutions but community assets.
- There needs to be collaboration so a jurisdiction isn't forced to run water, sewer and roads to a school after a decision has already been made to site a school
- There is a need for a set of regulations, standards and ordinances related to school siting
- Also a need for a matrix to show the total costs for school siting, not just the cost of the land and the building, but the impacts on environmental and personal health, traffic congestion, land values, etc.
- Public health can play a role in promoting the health benefits of walking and bicycling to school, as well as benefits to child asthma from improved air quality around schools (90% of schools in the nation are in poor air quality zones)
- Multistory schools are something that codes rarely allow but typically are the most attractive school buildings (more historic schools are multistory). These buildings save money because the footprint of buildings is smaller

### **School Siting and Transportation**

- Lack of walking/bicycling infrastructure and a lack of a culture and education around walking and bicycling prohibit children from walking to school
- Retrofitting an existing school is often cheaper than building a road to a new school
- Schools that provide multiple access points (one side for cars, another for buses and another for walkers) can help to alleviate traffic congestion rather than having one access point
- Mixed use neighborhoods and high density support neighborhood schools
- Often the costs of busing are not factored into school siting decisions
- There is relationship between congestion around schools and the economy
- \$34 Million was the cost of busing students for the 2009-2010 school year in Nashville
- There is opportunity to coordinate with public transportation agencies

### **School Siting and Parks**

- Siting schools with parks saves a jurisdiction money
- Also promotes outdoor learning
- Outdoor time linked to higher test scores, reduced absenteeism and reduced behavioral problems
- Helps to build a sense of community – school is a community anchor
- Decision makers are often not aware of the multiple benefits of joint use
- There are often a lack of policies around joint use and turf wars over who uses the facility and who pays for maintenance
- Joint use agreements keep in mind what is best for children, education and communities overall

### Symposium Participant Survey Results

Participants responded that the quality of the speakers and the diversity of participants were the best parts of the symposium. The symposium did a good job of introducing the topic of school siting and how it relates to the jobs of all of the people in the room. Participants said that the symposium provided a chance to stop and really think about school siting. Many ended up seeing the process as a developer trying to build a project as cheaply as possible rather than a holistic community decision. This was an opportunity to start the conversation about school siting practices in Middle Tennessee and how these decisions could be made differently. The two major recommendations from participants included hosting training for school board members and planning commissioners on school siting and Including school siting guidelines in community plans.

### Next Steps

Next steps for the MPO around school siting include SRTS, bike/ped planning, and fostering discussions between school board members, elected officials, and the public and private sectors.