



NASHVILLE AREA

Metropolitan Planning Organization

School Siting in Middle Tennessee

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Executive Summary

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The placement of schools or “school siting” is a practice that in many communities has become less a part of comprehensive community planning and more a part of decision making made primarily by school systems. In addition to lack of intergovernmental collaboration, school districts across the United States have adopted policies and practices that are widely varied regarding the process of locating or relocating school facilities. The practice of siting schools has implications for the economic growth and development of communities, transportation infrastructure needed to support schools, and for the health of America’s children, in the realms of air quality, asthma rates and childhood obesity.

Because school sites and supporting transportation facilities (especially sidewalks, bikeways and transit) are many times planned separately, schools often lack the appropriate infrastructure available for children and families to travel to and from school. Though an increased emphasis has been placed upon “smart growth” principles in community planning, in many communities little is known about building practices within the realm of school construction. As communities grow and change in response to demographic shifts, it is important to assess how school districts are implementing smart growth principles in decisions regarding school siting.

Statewide policies on school siting in many states have required or recommended base parcel sizes for schools called the “minimum acreage requirement.” The minimum acreage requirement essentially sets forth a standard minimum acreage for elementary, middle and high schools. For example, according to a Council of Education Facilities Planners International (CEFPI) Issue Trak from 2003, the state of Rhode Island requires 10 acres for an elementary school, 20 acres for a junior high/middle school and 30 acres for a high school, plus an additional acre for each 100 students enrolled. This creates situations in many states where policy dictates large school sites.

In 2004, CEFPI the came out with a watershed publication, “Schools for Successful Communities.” In this publication, CEFPI, which had long been the advocate for the minimum acreage requirement, essentially stated that such policies were not needed for effective school sites. In Tennessee, no state level policy exists regarding school siting or minimum acreage requirements. As such, school facilities planners work in a fairly insular way in the process of school siting. Important to recognize is that while there is no minimum acreage requirement in Tennessee, it certainly is possible that school facilities planners adhere to one, and even if they do not, minimum acreage requirements may be viewed as best practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A host of academic literature exists on the topic of school siting as it relates to a number of different policy communities. A brief sample of the research findings include research that suggests:

- Well-sited schools promote walking and biking to school, which provides children with a much needed opportunity for physical activity.

- Levels of physical fitness have direct impacts upon student academic achievement and absenteeism from school.
- Parents and students enjoy and prefer school locations that have infrastructure that supports the ability to walk or bike to school.
- Major authorities within the field of community and regional planning view school siting as a priority topic and well sited, infrastructure supported schools are chief among recommended best practice in facilities planning.

CURRENT PRACTICE IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE

- Most school districts in the greater Nashville area are experiencing a period of high growth, in many cases on the order of 3-7% per school year. This is subsequently causing a period of fast growth for school districts in terms of capital projects, as well as the building of schools that have high enrollment capacities to accommodate the influx of new students into the district.
- The process of planning new schools involves multiple actors. In most cases, school facilities planners in Middle Tennessee consult with architects, engineers and planners before bringing a proposal to the Board of Education. Once approved by the Board, the proposal would then move forward to the City or County Commission.
- Collaboration between comprehensive plans of the city and the school district are not always working in tandem. It seems as though the urgency of building schools fast to accommodate growth impedes this process.
- The most important factor for school facilities planning is cost. Additionally, school facilities planners that were interviewed cited having a safe building and environment for children, as well as providing an instructionally appropriate environment as other essential factors of a “good school.”
- Schools are sometimes placed in strategic locations within a rural county, for example between two cities, or between two schools that are over capacity. This process may often times not consider long term implications for growth or access to sidewalks, greenways, bikeways and transit.
- Many districts in Middle Tennessee, while not going for LEED certification are using “green building practices” in the construction of new schools. Interviewees cited the cost of becoming LEED certified as a major barrier.
- Districts, specifically those experiencing large amounts of growth, are using the same “building footprint” for multiple schools in an effort to lower costs as well as get schools built in an expedited manner.
- School facilities planners cited numerous instances in which they planned for sidewalk and bike lane access on the school grounds, noting that often times cities, municipalities or developers are the ones who choose to not to continue the sidewalk, etc, thereby prohibiting the possibility of children walking and biking to school.
- Most districts in our region are not faced with the problem of having to decide upon whether or not to close a school since there exists a large amount of economic growth. In many instances, school facilities planners were able to talk about renovations or repurposing of historic schools in our region.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Intergovernmental Collaboration:** School districts, wherever possible should coordinate with community planners and other governmental entities. In addition to community planning agencies, agencies such as transportation, health, historic preservation, parks and law enforcement should be invited to participate in school siting decisions. Regular, publicly advertised meetings should be held.
- **Transparent Policy and Process:** School districts in concert with city and county commissions should make every possible effort to make the process of siting a new school, or renovating an existing school as transparent as possible. This includes but is not limited to publicly advertising for bids for building contracts, allowing the public to be involved in siting decisions at all stages of development, maintaining accessible public records on school siting and having regular contact with the community.
- **Schools as Centers of Community:** School facilities planners, whenever possible, should select locations that are accessible by means of non-motorized transport. Additionally, schools should be sited in locations where public transit access is available.
- **Incentives to Building Well Sited Community Schools:** This may be viewed as either a local or perhaps statewide objective. School facilities planners currently operate in a budget climate that rewards them for building low cost and often remotely located schools. Examining ways in which districts can support school facilities planners in an effort to work with transit, parks, transportation and health policy communities would be extremely beneficial.
- **Policies Requiring Developers and Cities to Build Infrastructure:** School facilities planners are, in many cases, working extremely hard to make sure that appropriate sidewalks and bike lanes are developed on new school sites. As such, a similar expectation should be placed upon cities or developers so that children have connective thoroughfares to and from school.

To read the full policy report, or for more information about school siting and regional planning, please visit the MPO's website at www.nashvillempo.org/schools.html.