Planning for Schools & Liveable Communities

The Oregon School Siting Handbook

Cover Photo: Edison Elementary School, Eugene, OR

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Abraham Lincoln Elementary School, Medford, OR

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June 2005

This project is partially funded by the Oregon Transportation & Growth Management Program (TGM), a joint program of the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development. This TGM project is financed, in part, by the federal Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21), and State of Oregon funds.

The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect views or policies of the State of Oregon.

Project Background

In 2004, the Oregon Transportation and Growth Management Program contracted with the Community Planning Workshop (CPW) at the University of Oregon to conduct a year-long evaluation of Oregon's school siting process. The purpose of the evaluation was twofold: (1) to develop a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities school districts and local governments experience when making school siting decisions; (2) to empower school districts and local governments to make more informed decisions about future school siting. This handbook is the culmination of that research and synthesizes many of the lessons learned.

As part of the study, CPW performed the following tasks:

Literature Review: Conducted an extensive review of literature about school siting issues.

Case Studies: Investigated the school siting practices of eight school districts around the state through site visits and interviews with school superintendents, school facility planners, local government planners, architects, and neighborhood groups. Administered a school transportation survey and conducted focus groups at four middle schools to learn more about how children get to and from school.

School Superintendent Survey: Created a survey, disseminated to school district superintendents, focusing on district needs and siting issues.

Oregon School Siting Forum: Held a statewide conference encouraging dialogue about school siting issues by a wide range of people, including school district personnel, architects, planners, health advocates, and neighborhood organizers.

Success Story

Building Partnerships

"The school siting process went very well. I don't know how it gets any better."

– Kent Hunsaker, Former Bethel School District Superintendent

It began informally as a natural partnership between the Bethel School District and the City of Eugene. It came to exemplify how a school district and a city government can buy, develop, and share land for everyone's benefit.

In 1989, as a forward thinking measure, the Bethel School District bought 70 acres well outside the urban area for a potential school site. In 1995, the district approached the city with a desire to build a new school. The city explained that "the site wouldn't be good for the school district or the city." Instead of leaving the district alone to look for another site, the city worked with the district to identify appropriate alternative parcels within the urban area that would satisfy everyone's interests. In the end, the district and the city together purchased a 70-acre parcel. Today, this property includes the 35-acre site of Meadow View School (capacity: 800 students, kindergarten through eigth grade) and the 35-acre Bethel Community Park, which includes wetlands, a running path, ball fields, and a skate/community park. If growth continues in the area, the district may develop a small elementary school (K-5) adjacent to the current school. What began as a relationship lacking communication and coordination ended up as a coordinated partnership united by a common goal: community development.

"It is a real relationship of trust...now you have lots of kids walking through the park to get to school."

– Carolyn Weiss, City of Eugene Parks and Open Space

Introduction

School Location:
An important and complex decision

"Public education is an investment in the future, both for our children and for our communities.

The average life span of a public school in the United States is 75 years. That, combined with the large financial investment for new school construction, makes cooperation and community input in the school facility planning process critical.

We are not only building schools for our children, but for many generations to come."

– Jan Youngquist
Beaverton School District

School districts and local governments depend on each other. A growing community places greater demands on the school system, thereby creating a need for more or expanded schools. Likewise, a new school often stimulates significant traffic as well as residential development near the new school site. Thus, the actions of one entity affect the interests of the other. Given this fact, it is imperative that school districts and local jurisdictions work together to site schools.

Deciding where to build a new school or whether to renovate an existing school is not an easy decision. Superintendents, school boards, planning commissions and city planners must balance multiple viewpoints and priorities – from parents wanting expansive athletic fields, to educators wanting smaller, more manageable schools, to transportation planners concerned about traffic, to residents insisting that tax dollars support teachers not facilities, to city planners who want to concentrate growth in the center of town, to community residents who see the school as a neighborhood anchor. Negotiating these complexities takes vision, leadership, and skill.

This handbook is for everyone involved in the school siting process - superintendents, school board members, city planners, transportation engineers and citizen activists. Every community will face unique challenges when siting elementary, middle and high schools, yet many communities will confront similar challenges in four areas: funding, land availability, transportation/accessibility, and coordinated planning. The goal of this handbook is to provide strategies for locating schools in ways that benefit the whole community. Working together, and using creative solutions, school districts and cities can locate schools that take full advantage of existing resources, are easily and safely accessible, and become true community anchors.

Ensworth Elementary School, Bend, OR

Why should I care about school location?

Schools unite neighborhoods.

The role of the school as a neighborhood focal point is not new. As long ago as the 1920s, Clarence Stein, architect and city planner, advocated for towns in which the school was the physical center of the neighborhood reflecting its prominent role in the community. He believed that a centrally located school reinforces community life and spirit because it is easily accessible and can serve as a community crossroad. In Stein's view, the majority of the students should live within a quarter mile of the school.

The school's role as a community focal point is still seen today. Parents meet each other while taking their children to school. Neighbors bump into each other while walking their dogs on the schoolgrounds. Grandparents attend the school play and recognize a friend from long ago. Through these informal interactions, social networks are formed that help people provide a stronger support system for children and feel more connected to their community.

"If the district wants a lot of students in the school, then it has to build big schools on big lots. If it wants small schools, then it needs small lots. This is basic, but is a big philosophical decision."

– Ron Barber
Barber, Barrett & Turner

Transportation costs are increasing.

Due to many factors, including the high cost of land, lack of available land, and the desire for large sport fields, America's schools are increasingly being built on the periphery of communities.[1] The cost of transporting students to and from school has risen significantly as school sites have become less community-centered and located farther from the neighborhoods they serve. The state of Oregon spent $130 million for school transportation costs in 2003-04 and is expected to spend $135 million in 2004-05. Recent fuel price increases are straining the budgets of parents and local school districts, both of which often provide student transportation.

Childhood obesity is rising.

If children live within a mile and a half of school, there is a significantly better chance that they will walk to school.[2] In 1969, close to 90% of students who lived within a mile of school walked or biked to school.[3] By 2000, this number decreased to only 10%.[4] The Institute of Medicine cites the decrease in walking and biking to school as one of the major contributors to childhood obesity. Among 6-11 year olds, obesity has tripled over the last three decades.[5]

School Siting Guiding Principles

The location of schools is one of the most important decisions a community will make. School districts and local governments should use these principles to guide them through the school siting process.

1 School Siting Decisions Benefit the Entire Community

Public schools educate our youth to be lifelong learners, engaged citizens, and effective workers in an ever-changing world. Schools are vital institutions in our society. In addition to educating young people, they provide physical places for the community to gather for cultural or sporting events, walk the dog, or play in the playground or school field. Their location affects the social, economic and physical character of a city.

Through coordinated planning, school districts, local governments, and community residents select school locations that advance livability goals strongly supported by Oregonians: vibrant communities, good schools, and transportation choices. Well-coordinated school facility planning and comprehensive community planning increases the likelihood that taxpayer dollars will be used efficiently; that school facility and community planning will support, rather than work against, each other; and that community facilities can be jointly purchased, developed, maintained, and used.

2 The School Site Takes Full Advantage of Existing Resources

School sites close to existing infrastructure reduce the need for new facilities. In short, by making good use of existing resources, schools can reduce their physical and financial impact on the community and the environment. Integrating well-designed schools into existing or proposed neighborhoods efficiently uses streets, sidewalks and other infrastructure. Preserving historic school buildings helps maintain neighborhood identity and treasured community landmarks, and reusing existing buildings reduces land consumption. School sites that are close to existing play fields or open space provide students with exercise opportunities and access to natural resources.

3 The School Site is Easily and Safely Accessible by Walking, Biking, and Transit

An important aspect of liveable communities is the option to safely walk, bike, and use transit to reach key destinations. A well-sited school gives school children more transportation choices. This is good for children and good for the community for several reasons: (1) greater accessibility reinforces schools as community focal points; (2) reducing the number of cars on the road decreases traffic congestion and air pollution; (3) opportunities for daily exercise encourage children to develop healthy lifestyles; and (4) children acquire life skills and habits that incorporate a variety of transportation options.

4 The School Site is a Community Focal Point

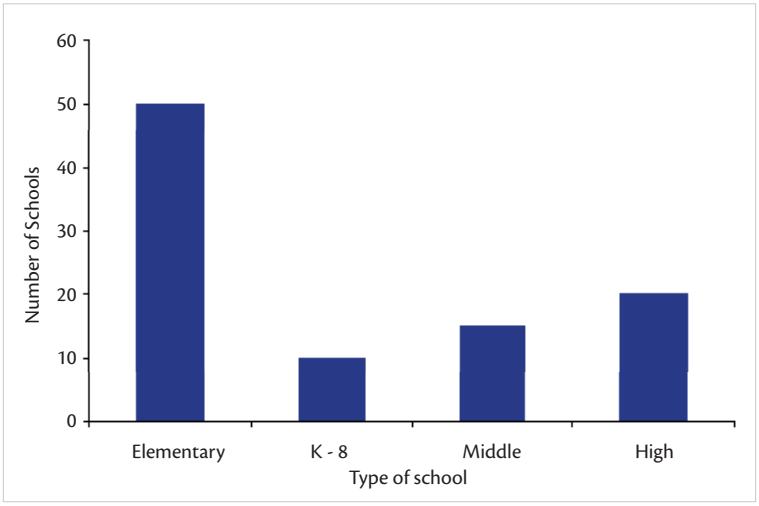
Through good siting decisions, schools become more than places to educate students; they serve as community focal points and neighborhood anchors. Community members use the school facility after school hours. Neighbors interact with each other at the school site. A school's proximity and easy access enhance participation by neighborhood residents in school activities. This, in turn, strengthens the neighborhood's sense of ownership toward the school and its willingness to take care of and support it.

Population increase = Need for new or expanded schools

Oregon's school-aged population is growing. As it does, many communities face a need for new or expanded facilities. In 2004, Oregon's 198 school districts had 1,263 schools and more than 550,000 students.[6] This number is expected to increase by nearly 30,000 students by 2013.[7]

In the 2004 School Superintendent Survey, Oregon school districts reported a need for nearly 50 new elementary schools, about 15 middle/junior high schools, ten K-8 schools, and 20 high schools by 2019. According to the survey, the state of Oregon can expect more than 100 new schools to be built by 2019.

Projected Need for New Schools by 2019



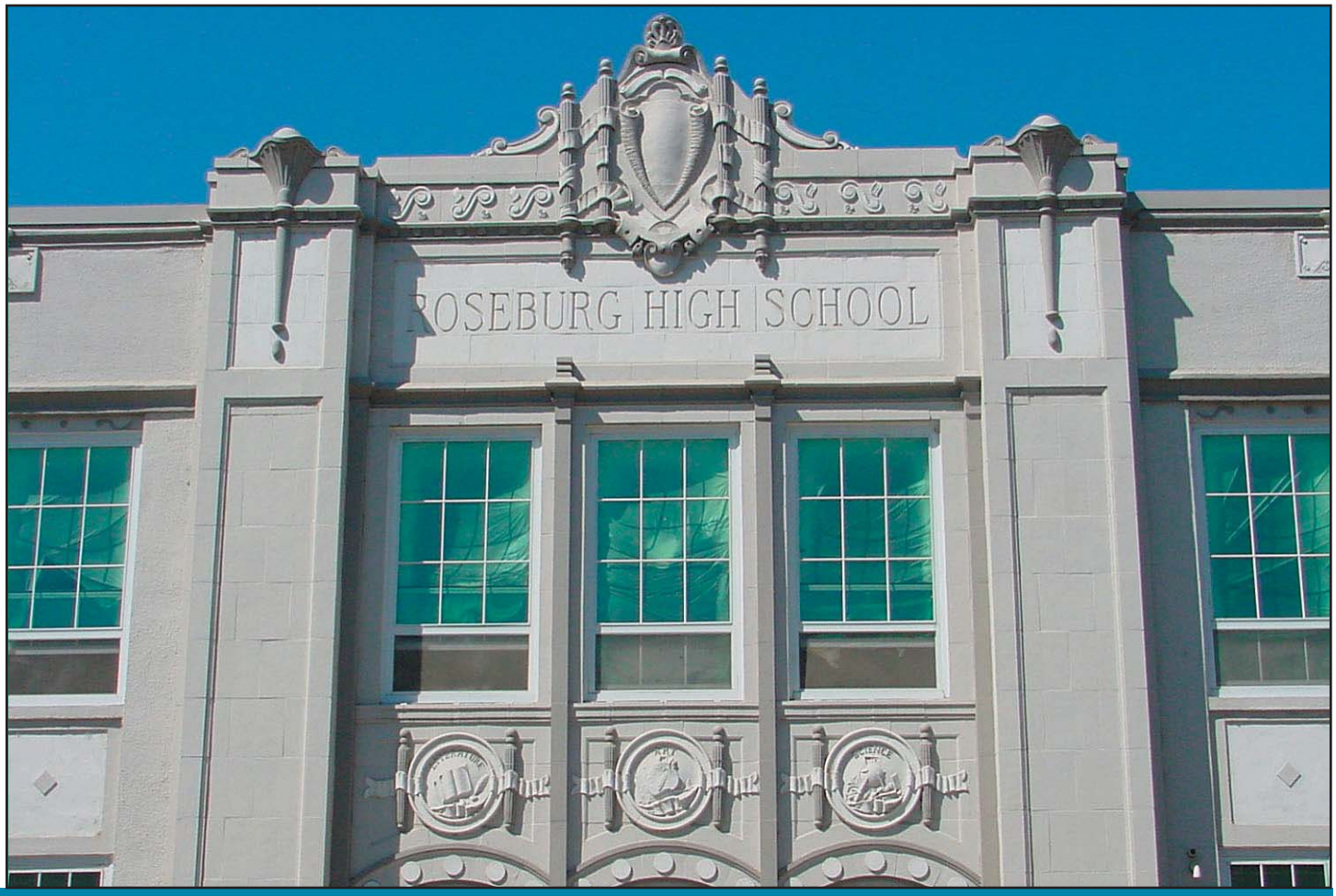
Source: 2004 School Superintendent Survey

Challenges & Opportunities

Like any large-scale construction project, siting and building schools is multi-faceted. For example, before ground can be broken, school districts must secure funding from the community, identify and purchase sites, complete impact studies and prepare architectural plans, and obtain land use and building permits. Each community's process will be unique. However, most communities will inevitably have to confront at least four major challenges: **funding, land availability, transportation/accessibility,** and **coordinated planning.**

This section describes each of these challenges from a school district and city/county point of view. Through case studies, it demonstrates how specific communities in Oregon and around the country have utilized innovative strategies to address these challenges.

Roseburg High School, Roseburg, OR



The Challenge: Funding

School construction and reconstruction is extraordinarily expensive. Districts often lack access to the capital required to buy land and build a school (most are in the millions of dollars), and frequently rely on general obligation (GO) bonds that must receive voter approval. To pass bonds, the school district must balance its own needs with what it believes the community will agree to fund. Some school districts spend years trying to match their needs to what the community will support. For example, if a community wants several athletic fields around a school, the voters may not pass the bond if it fails to include the fields. Moreover, voters are reluctant to approve bonds for districts to acquire sites that will not be developed in the immediate future (a process called "land banking"). In turn, this naturally influences future siting decisions.

Most districts do not have a reserve of land waiting for school development. Like any other developer, they are forced to compete for land in the open market. In many instances this requires districts to pay premium prices for sites. According to the 2004 School Superintendent Survey, land cost is second only to land availability in factors affecting school siting. If a school district cannot buy the desired lands at affordable prices, it will be forced to acquire sites along the urban periphery, away from the highest population densities. Simply stated, districts need access to large sums of money for land purchases directly within the nation's most rapidly growing areas.

"Passing bonds is the main challenge."
– Karen Rawnsley
Financial Officer
Redmond School District

Case Studies

Redmond, Oregon

Against the odds, the Redmond School District persevered in its dream to purchase four parcels of land and proceed with plans to construct an elementary and middle school. First, it had to build public support for the bond measure necessary to pay off an existing loan. Early in 2004 the district issued a challenge to local voters: pass the bond placed on the March ballot or the school district would eliminate its overcrowding problem by moving either to year-round classes or double-track students (half in the morning, half in the afternoon).

The district collaborated with community residents to facilitate success in passing the bond measure. Citizens for Quality Schools, a grassroots organization of parents, employed a series of strategies. Three hundred volunteers went door-to-door to discuss the value of passing the bond. They collected donations from small businesses and produced an ad for television. The superintendent appeared on TV and radio advertisements. She spoke with community groups, businesses, and citizens. The district also produced a six-minute informational video describing the situation of Redmond schools and the dire consequences if the bond failed. Luckily, the bond passed by 600 votes.

Redmond will use many of the lessons learned from this bond measure experience in forthcoming efforts, including: starting community outreach efforts early; developing diverse outreach strategies to appeal to different parts of the community; and stressing the message that schools are an integral part of a community's quality of life.

Glendale, California

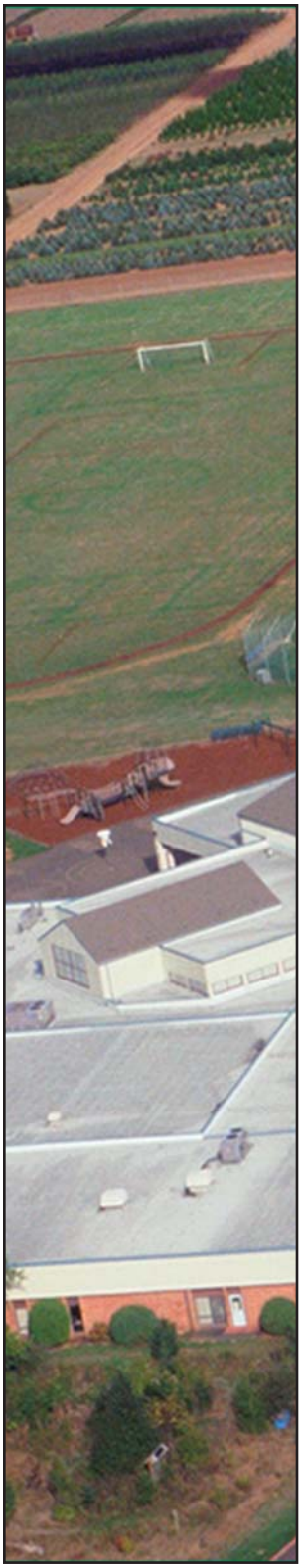
A recent partnership in Glendale demonstrated how unifying the agendas and visions of a city government and a public school district can lead to mutual success. As in many suburban towns, the city and a school district aggressively compete with developers for space when replacing or renovating their aging public infrastructure. This time, Glendale's solution was co-location. In 2002, the City of Glendale and the Glendale Unified School District completed a $17.9 million joint-use facility project – the Edison School and Pacific Park.

Through a community involvement process, city and school district officials identified strategies for how to share facilities at the new elementary school site. Facilities include: multi-purpose cafeteria; art, science, and computer classrooms; city branch and school library; playing area and field; park; and a community center. The facility operates daily from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. The district has exclusive use of the facility during all school hours. The facility is then open to the community after school and on weekends. Students and school staff use one entrance while a separate entrance is reserved for community access.

By reducing costs involved with initial construction, operation, and land supply, the city and school district, together, claim the joint-use strategy saved them nearly $5 million. Beyond producing a multi-functional school and community center, the Edison School/Pacific Park project also transformed the concept of joint-use. It provided a powerful example of how to both accelerate and enhance new school construction.

For more information: New Schools Better Neighborhoods Update, Spring 2000, www.nsbn.org

The Challenge: Land Availability



Acquiring school sites is a big challenge. Whether it's a 5-acre site for a small elementary school, or a 40-acre plot for a large high school, districts must compete with private developers to purchase land. In fact, nearly two-thirds of those surveyed in the 2004 School Superintendent Survey identified "land availability" as the most influential factor in siting new schools.

Unlike many other states, the state of Oregon does not impose acreage standards for school sites. Of the superintendents surveyed, 90 percent indicated that their district has not adopted formal acreage standards or guidelines for school sites. Moreover, most city and county comprehensive plans do not specify location criteria (not to mention guidelines for school siting). While this may allow flexibility in identifying potential sites, it can also introduce uncertainty into the siting process.

While most districts lack formal acreage standards, half of those surveyed use informal standards during the site acquisition process. Many use outdated guidelines from the Council of Educational Facility Planners International as follows: elementary schools – 10 acres plus one acre for every 100 students; middle schools – 20 acres plus one acre for every 100 students; high schools – 30 acres plus one acre for every 100 students. These guidelines were rescinded in 2004. Current thinking suggests that school site size should reflect educational program needs, independent of arbitrary acreage standards.

Finding sites is the greatest challenge for districts. What size best meets educational program needs? What about community opinion and city regulations? Beyond the school building, districts must consider athletic facilities, staging areas for buses, parking, buffer zones, site constraints such as wetlands, and landscaping requirements. The more elements there are that require land, the larger the site needs to be, and the more difficult it becomes to centrally locate the school. Districts are tempted to look for land on the urban fringe because it's cheaper and less limited than potential sites within the city.

Ideally, districts will be able to identify single parcels that meet their acreage needs. Assembling sites from smaller parcels requires working with multiple landowners, which costs both time and money. As buildable land within communities becomes more scarce, school districts and cities/counties should work together more carefully through planning and creative siting strategies to address growing challenges to finding suitable land.

Case Studies

Hillsboro, Oregon

School siting is at the heart of the Witch Hazel Village Community Plan. Through smart growth, Hillsboro seeks to "create the quintessential new urbanist community." Situated on 318 acres, the proposed Witch Hazel Village will accommodate 5,000 new residents. Demand for new school facilities is bound to increase.

In the spirit of coordination, the City of Hillsboro approached the school district with the need for a new school. The district bought 20 acres of land in the middle of the proposed village. The Witch Hazel site is ideal because it is centrally located and adjacent to the site of a future civic plaza.

Witch Hazel Elementary is the first completed building in the Village Plan. It accommodates 660 students and is located on roughly half of the school-owned property. Future plans for the site include co-locating a three-story middle school on the western half. Neighborhood walkways will connect the schools to the community. Embodying the four guiding principles of school siting, this Community Plan exemplifies the success of locating schools in the community center by maximizing land use.

Pomona, California

With limited land availability, insufficient facilities, and little political support for eminent domain, Pomona Unified School District's options for school sites were limited to small odd-shaped land parcels and old, vacant industrial sites throughout the city. However, through creative thinking and with cooperation from the city, the school district redeveloped a deteriorating mall and run-down grocery store located in an older and socio-economically depressed section of town, into a vibrant educational facility for kindergarten through high school students. The facility, *The Village Complex at Indian Hill Pueblo School*, provides separate student instructional facilities, a shared cafeteria, and on-site recreation space. The redevelopment site now houses school district administrative offices as well.

For more information: New Schools for Older Neighborhoods (Local Government Commission)
www.lgc.org.freepub.PDF/Land-use/reports/new_schools_rpt.pdf

The Challenge: Transportation & Accessibility

School districts are responsible for accommodating diverse transportation needs. Location determines accessibility and influences bus loading areas, car drop-off/pick-up, parking, and pedestrian and bicycle access. If the school is located on a major road, it will be more accessible by auto. But it may not necessarily be friendly to walkers or bicyclists.

The distance a student lives from school impacts his or her ability to walk or bike to school.[8] If large schools are built in low density housing areas, most children are likely to live far away from school. This will heighten dependence on motorized transportation and force the school to provide more parking and loading/unloading areas. Alternatively, if schools are relatively small and built in close proximity to higher density housing, children will live nearby and will be more likely to walk or bike to school. However, since the state of Oregon pays a large percentage of busing costs, there is little financial incentive for school districts to encourage biking and walking, as opposed to busing.

A street network with lots of dead-ends and cul-de-sacs also discourages walking and biking to school. Therefore, planners and school administrators need to think about the street networks around schools.[9] Herein lies a central conflict - while school districts may determine school location and on-site pedestrian improvements, they lack control of sidewalks and street types and patterns in the immediate vicinity.

In addition to location and neighborhood design, convenience significantly influences how children travel to and from school. Parents participating in a University of Oregon/TGM survey of middle school student transportation patterns chose factors related to convenience (drop off on way to work) as primary reasons for driving their children to school. Other influential factors included: "personal safety (fear of strangers), comfort (weather), and school requirements (carrying books or musical instruments)" as barriers to walking or biking.[10]

While the urban form influences the decision of whether to walk, bike, or ride to school in a motor vehicle, discussion of transportation issues must involve a wide variety of people, from district administrators to city and transportation planners, from traffic engineers and parents to the children who attend the schools.

Case Studies

Bend, Oregon

The Bend-LaPine School District ushered in a new era with the opening of Ensworth Elementary in 2004. "It's progressive," said District Director of Operations John Rexford, "but in a way it's borrowing from the past. What's old is new again."

Based on its 1997 School Siting study, the district developed the Sites and Facilities 2000 Study to guide school development over the next 15 years. The study recommended developing a small school prototype (300 student capacity) as a supplement to the previous (600 student) design. According to the plan, "Smaller schools should be easier to site because there are more sites to select from, encourage walking and biking to school if they are well-sited, may increase after-hours use of the facilities, and require fewer off-site development costs (sewer, water, sidewalk, and road construction)."[11]

Of the 300 students that now attend Ensworth Elementary, 250 can walk or bike to school. Only one bus is used to transport children across a busy road. While the school sits on 9 acres, the prototype could be situated on a 5-acre plot. The district built up, rather than out. The school consists of two detached buildings: a two-story classroom facility and a combination gymnasium and cafeteria. To meet code, it installed sprinklers and additional second-story exits. To encourage community use, it makes the gymnasium and cafeteria available after hours.

Resurrecting traditional 1920s design has proved successful. "The difference between this school and others is that we're tucked into the neighborhood," says the kindergarten teacher. "We're the heart of the neighborhood. With many schools, you couldn't walk...you have to drive or get on a bus."

Boise, Idaho

After a citizen campaign convinced the school board to approve $13.5 million to renovate rather than abandon Boise High School (located on 11.5 acres near downtown), the school district developed the following innovative transportation strategies:

- **Create a parking overlay zone**. The city created a special parking zone allowing the school district to have full access to a public right-of-way to create parking spaces.
- **Park on neighborhood streets**. There are 475 parking spaces on the city streets reserved for students. The city enforces the parking program, and the school uses a lottery system to allocate spaces.
- **Use existing parking areas**. An agreement with a nearby church made available 45 additional spaces for student parking.
- **Add bike racks**. The school increased the number of bike racks to accommodate the increased demand.
- **Give students free city bus passes**. The school district bought bus passes for students to use city buses.

For more information: New Schools for Older Neighborhoods (Local Government Commission) www.lgc.org.freepub.PDF/Land-use/reports/new_schools_rpt.pdf

The Challenge: Coordinated Planning

School districts operate independently from municipal governments. Yet community growth affects both. From a municipality's perspective, new homes require increased municipal services. From a district's perspective, new homes mean more children to educate. New schools, in turn, attract more households. And the cycle continues. Thus, the actions of one entity influence the other. Given this interdependence, why is the coordinated planning between school districts and cities/counties so limited?

Answer: incentives for coordinated planning are weak or non-existent. Thanks to the vision and perseverance of certain individuals, coordinated planning does take place, even though there are few state requirements that encourage coordination and collaboration. As one city planner put it, "The school district makes the decisions about school siting. We see them as the experts, we defer to their expertise." Counter to this belief, coordinated planning combines the expertise of these mutually exclusive, yet interdependent, entities to maximize outcomes.

Oregon cities and counties are required to prepare comprehensive land use plans that guide future growth and development. Unfortunately, most comprehensive plans only indicate the locations of existing schools, simply noting that new sites will be needed as the population increases. These plans do not include criteria for siting new schools. They also lack strategies for working with school districts to identify and secure sites.

State law requires communities with "high growth school districts" to work with the school district to develop and incorporate a school facility plan into the community comprehensive plan ("high growth districts" are those whose enrollment exceeds 5,000 students and with at least 6% growth over the three most recent school years). Although this law encourages coordinated planning, only a handful of school districts meet this requirement and have developed plans under this provision.

While coordinated planning can be daunting, districts and cities/counties desire the partnership. According to the 2004 School Superintendent Survey, about 75% of the superintendents surveyed confirmed that additional coordination between districts and local government would be valuable. Ideas for enhanced coordination between these two entities include: regularly scheduled meetings, coordinated ballot measures, and district presentations to the planning commission and city council.

Case Studies

Beaverton, Oregon

In response to ORS 195.110 requirements, the Beaverton School District, Oregon's third largest district, completed the update of its Facility Plan in 2002. The plan projects that the district will need eleven elementary, eight middle, and one comprehensive high school over the next 20 years. These facilities will require that the district acquire an average of 10 acres every year. Acquiring sufficiently large parcels of land for new schools is a formidable task, given the lack of availability and high price of vacant land within the Portland metropolitan area urban growth boundary (UGB). Land sells for between $300,000 and $500,000 per acre, and prices are volatile. The plan recommends that the district take "steps to design its facilities in a manner that reduces overall demand for land, and makes efficient use of land a facilities planning priority." [12] To meet this goal, the district decided to implement the following strategies:

Reduce site acreage criteria: Because of the scarcity of land, the district's Facility Plan Committee recommended a reduction in site minimum acreage criteria and hosted a charrette to put forth compact elementary school designs that could be built on one to two acres within a Transit Oriented Development.

Partner with Park and Recreation District: The district identified the potential for reducing the need for larger sites through the joint use of recreational facilities operated by the park and recreation district.

Intensify use of existing school buildings: By retrofitting existing "oversized" school sites, the district makes more efficient use of existing space. For example, Aloha Park Elementary, located on a 13.5-acre site, is being converted to a middle school. The district has purchased a 10-acre "replacement" elementary school site.

State of New Jersey

State governments wondering how to foster effective inter-agency coordination for long-range planning could take a lesson from the Garden State. In 2002, then Governor James McGreevy established a Smart Growth Policy with the intention of "ensuring that school construction initiatives promote smart growth, open space, and revitalization of communities."[13] To help fund such initiatives, the state offers Smart Future Planning Grants to help schools and communities meet their regional planning objectives. In addition, the state has implemented a collaborative planning process between school districts and city governments by requiring all school districts to file long-range (5 years) school facility plans with local planning boards.

For more information: New Jersey School Board Association, www.njsba.org

Success Story

Preserving the old, while building the new.

"There is an incredible amount of charm living in the neighborhood with a school..."
– Roseburg resident

Roseburg High School's first graduating class walked out of the front doors of the stone building in 1924. For eighty years, Roseburg students have sung the same alma mater. In 2003, due to a local education policy shift that moved the ninth grade from junior high into the high school , the community had a major decision to make about how to accomodate the increased high school enrollment- would it support two high schools or would it continue to support only one? After an extensive public involvement campaign that included focus groups, community workshops, and a telephone survey, the majority of the community decided that it wanted only one high school. Some residents say that the main reason for this was the desire to maintain one hometown football team. Whatever the reason, the school district then faced the decision whether to renovate the existing high school located on 25 acres close to downtown or build a new school. Listening to the desires of the community - "don't leave the current site – it is an anchor of tradition", the school district bought more land around the high school and built a new two-story classroom and administration building to accommodate the additional 600 ninth grade students. In Fall 2004, the renovated campus opened with 2100 students.

Roseburg High School, Roseburg, OR

Recommendations

Recognizing that there are challenges involved in siting schools, what specific actions can school districts and cities take to facilitate better siting decisions? The recommendations that follow suggest ways to turn challenges into opportunities and select school sites that are consistent with the guiding principles listed in this handbook.

1 School Siting Decisions Benefit the Entire Community

"Get a headstart. Long range planning is the key. Do it before there is pressure to build. This way you can be more systematic about it and make more rational decisions."

– Steve Barrett
Assistant Superintendent
Springfield School District

Develop a school facilities plan.

State law requires communities with "fast growing" school districts to work with the district to develop facilities plans. Districts, even those with declining enrollments, should create a school facilities plan that anticipates need for the next 10 – 20 years. Plans that involve local governments and the community in the planning process will be more successful. The process of planning helps districts understand municipal policies and regulations; but more importantly, it helps the district communicate a vision to residents (and voters) that has multiple benefits. Periodic plan updates will ensure the plan remains responsive to changing conditions in the community. Districts should make sure that the planning process is well-informed by creative ideas and good information, not simply a review of stale school siting concepts.

Include schools districts in comprehensive land use plans.

State law requires coordination between governments during land use planning processes. Coordination, as it is currently implemented by most cities, is ineffective in addressing school districts' issues. School districts should be involved in the comprehensive planning process to ensure that the needs of the districts are articulated in the land use plan and implementing ordinances. This involvement provides opportunities to develop and agree upon criteria for siting new schools on new sites as well as siting new schools in previously developed areas. In short, good comprehensive plans can provide multiple benefits to both the city and the school district.

Streamline the permitting process.

School districts should work proactively with the city to reduce complications in the permitting process. They should acknowledge that certain city codes/regulations (i.e., height, setbacks, parking) may prohibit the school district from designing cutting edge schools. Clear communication can proactively identify issues and lead to creative solutions.

Develop intergovernmental agreements.

Such agreements are common between cities and service providers. Intergovernmental agreements clarify roles and responsibilities regarding land use and school facilities planning—including how to define responsibilities, share information, and resolve disagreements. Beaverton School District uses intergovernmental agreements with the Tualatin Hills Parks and Recreation District to define maintenance responsibilities and field use (normally the recreation district maintains the fields located at schools in return for after-school use).

Involve the community.

School districts should include the community in school siting decisions. Good community involvement will initiate a sustained, informed dialogue about issues. Moreover, it provides districts a way to communicate to residents and voters that school siting is a necessary element of a good educational program.

"Don't make assumptions that everyone supports schools. If you do not reach out to everyone, you will not gain support."

– Judy Delahunt
Superintendent
Redmond School District

Oregon School Siting Forum, 2004

2 The School Site Takes Full Advantage of Existing Resources

"With the budget strapped for everyone, it makes sense to get creative."

- Rebecca Gershow
Willamalane Parks and Recreation District

Renovate and expand existing schools.

Where possible, districts should consider renovating or rebuilding schools on sites that have anchored neighborhoods for decades and to which students already can walk or bike. They should recognize that it is just as important to preserve, maintain, and renovate existing buildings as it is to build well-designed, well-located new ones. Working with architects and engineers who are familiar with school renovation practices is also valuable.

Select sites that can be served by existing infrastructure.

Infrastructure costs can add tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars of cost to the development of a school. Selecting sites near existing infrastructure has an obvious benefit: school districts can share infrastructure costs with nearby development. Districts can accomplish this by consulting the local planning office when identifying appropriate sites. Planning staff can help assess the costs and benefits of different sites—as well as identify key development issues.

Establish mechanisms for cooperative agreements.

Such agreements facilitate the shared use of facilities between schools and the local government. Districts should consider the full range of joint use possibilities including parks, recreation facilities, health clinics, elderly facilities, parking, public transportation, and others. The City of Eugene and Eugene 4J School District have developed a successful parking arrangement in which staff of the city-run pool can park in the lot of the adjacent school during the summer.

3 The School Site Is Easily and Safely Accessible by Walking, Biking, and Transit

Locate schools close to students.

Proximity is key. Schools must be close enough to the neighborhoods they serve for students to walk or bike to school. This is a basic, and yet extremely important concept. Increasing the number of students who live within walking/biking distance will increase the percentage of students who actually walk or bike to school.

Develop pedestrian facilities on the school site.

Even casual observation reveals that many schools have inadequate pedestrian facilities. Districts should use the following strategies to improve pedestrian access:

- Use the expertise of creative urban designers, transportation planners traffic/transportation engineers. Solicit advice from these groups early in the siting process. It is much easier for them to give advice about potential problems than to fix problems once the school is built/renovated.
- Provide for good pedestrian and bicycle access. Design the school site to promote walking and biking to school and reduce pedestrian/vehicle conflicts; place bike racks near entrances; designate pedestrian paths that are separate from automobile pick-up and drop-off zones; provide safety crossings and crossing guards.
- Create a "Safe Routes to Schools" campaign. Work with city staff, school staff, parents, law enforcement officers, and health care professionals to develop a "Safe Routes to School" campaign to address school-related transportation.
- Set up a student escort system. Work with school staff and parents to develop a system for organizing children to walk/bike to and from school in groups. Commuter Solutions in Eugene is working with local schools to develop escort systems in which parents take turns walking a group of students to school.

"If we want more children to walk to school, then it is imperative that we actually build routes to school. Although this sounds intuitive, the current preference for building neighborhoods with cul-de-sacs and collector streets actually creates barriers for kids to get to school."

– Marc Schlossberg, Ph.D.
University of Oregon

For more information:

Safe Routes to School
www.bikewalk.org/safe_routes_to_school/SR2S_introduction.htm

Smart Ways to School Program
www.ltd.org/sws/index.htm

3

Create a well-connected pedestrian and street network in the area/neighborhood around the school.

"School districts should work more closely with the city or county road authority much earlier in the process."
– Deborah Hogan
City of Bend

- Address the transportation infrastructure around schools. Make sure there are good connections between the school and nearby neighborhoods by creating pedestrian plans to integrate schools with the community. Work with schools to develop traffic calming devices, sidewalks, and pedestrian infrastructure.
- Develop a well-connected street system around the school. The school can provide bike racks and crossing guards, but if the area around the school is not conducive to walking, students will be less likely to walk or bike to school. The streets in the neighborhood around the school should connect to each other, allowing students to easily and directly get to school.
- Locate schools away from hazardous traffic conditions. Railroads and major streets such as arterials are dangerous to cross. Locating schools away from these impediments makes the schools easier to access by walking and biking.
- Remove policy barriers. Review the comprehensive land use plan, zoning ordinance, and functional plans to identify barriers such as excessive parking, setback, and landscaping requirements.
- Integrate school transportation into the Transportation Systems Plan. Most Transportation System Plans include detailed analysis of transportation needs and identify projects to meet those needs. Few address school transportation issues. One strategy is to include school transportation in regional transportation planning discussions. Such a discussion will inevitably involve potential school sites. Acknowledge that school transportation systems (i.e., school buses) are an effective form of public transportation that are largely ignored by land use and transportation planners. Work to integrate school busing into the larger discussion of transportation options.

4 The School Site Is a Community Focal Point

Consider small sites and multi-level schools.

Districts should select sites that can be incorporated into the neighborhood instead of sites that isolate the school from the community it serves. An excessively large site may reduce siting options, eliminate transportation choices, and foreclose the possibility of the school serving as a center of community. By using creative design, schools can be multi-level, thereby requiring less land and making it easier to integrate them into the neighborhood.

"Start with schools as a principle planning objective. Cities should think - How can we help schools operate?"

– Jack Orchard
land use lawyer

Involve your architect early in the process.

Districts should choose an architect who is familiar with creative school design. He/she may have good solutions for difficult site challenges. If school renovations are an option, be sure to select an architect who is experienced in working with older buildings. Twenty years ago architects were more involved in the entire school siting process, but now, according to an architect specializing in schools, "the norm is for school districts to come to the architect with either one or a few sites." Involving the architect earlier would allow him or her to work with the site selection committee to identify potential sites.

Integrate schools into the community.

Districts should begin by connecting the school to the surrounding neighborhood. Key strategies include: (1) removing barriers such as fences around school/playing fields. If fences are a security issue, include several gates so that people have free access to the school and associated facilities; (2) using trails, sidewalks, or bike paths to connect neighborhoods to the school; and (3) controlling auto access and parking so it does not create safety conflicts with pedestrian and bicycle access. The Witch Hazel Community Plan (Hillsboro, OR) requires the developer to build walking paths/sidewalks from the surrounding housing development to the school to facilitate better pedestrian connections.

4

Be proactive about identifying sites.

A well-sited school can turn a subdivision into a neighborhood. The fact that the district may not have a pool of capital for site acquisition does not preclude identifying and evaluating potential school sites. Consider the following strategies:

"The City must understand the district's needs and suggest acquisition opportunities."

– Wink Brooks
Hillsboro City Planner

- Land banking. By acquiring land before it is needed to build schools, districts and cities add certainty to the development process and allow better integration of schools into neighborhood. The Hillsboro School District has tried to get ahead of demand – each bond measure includes money to purchase land and replace land in the land bank.
- Developer set-asides. Identify school locations when meeting with developers and encourage school sites that integrate with the design of new developments. Encourage developers to dedicate or sell land for school sites as part of the entitlement process. Make sure that the site supports city planning goals. Be wary of donated sites whose location could undercut community preservation goals and force taxpayers to pay for unnecessarily expensive infrastructure, transportation, and other services.
- Community education. Begin by partnering with the city to raise awareness among residents about the importance of planning for schools in the future. Both the Bethel and Redmond School Districts attribute successfully passing bonds to involving the community in the process. Strategies included holding community meetings, producing print and television advertisements, canvassing door to door, and developing a large volunteer base.

Establish design and site standards for schools.

Working in partnership, school districts and cities should establish design and site standards for schools and school sites. Address the following issues:

- Size of sites (large enough to meet educational program needs, but small enough to fit easily and gracefully into the neighborhood served)
- Location of sites within the community
- Connectivity, bicycle and pedestrian standards
- Safety standards (including street design and speed)
- School design (encourage neighborhood pride in the school)

Steps for a Coordinated School Siting Process

Local governments and school districts that coordinate with each other about school location have an easier time in the siting process and make better site decisions.The following three steps serve as a guide for school districts and cities/counties. They are written from the perspective of the school district because districts normally initiate the process and ultimately will make decisions about where to build new schools or renovate existing ones. Each school district will follow a slightly different process for siting schools depending on the size of the district, the political climate of the community, the capacity of the school district and local jurisdiction.

Step 1

Determine What You Have & Articulate Need and Vision

How Can the City or County be Involved?

The city/county usually does not have a large role in the school district inventory; however, it plays a role in helping the district determine need by providing information on growth. The city/county should answer the following questions for the school district:

- What are the future growth projections?
- Where should growth occur?
- Where are transportation infrastructure improvements planned?
- What is the land use pattern within the city?
- Are new parks or other public facilities going to be built in the near future?
- What building codes pertain to schools?
- What does the comprehensive plan say about schools?
- Where does the city/county allow schools?
- How does the city/county envision its role in the school siting process?
- Are school planners and city planners using the same demographic and infrastructure data?
- Is the city/county interested in pursuing joint use opportunities such as development and maintenance of park and recreation facilities?

Why?

Determining the number and quality of school district facilities and having a good understanding of city/county growth patterns are important first steps in establishing the district's needs. This "needs statement" provides the rationale for the siting process. (For example, we have enough room for 20 more students and the city is expecting 200 more students in the next 5-7 years. We will need school capacity to accomodate 180 more students by 2010.) Instead of immediately trying to solve the problem, the school district should develop a vision for the siting process. How does it want to the process to run? What does it want the end result to be?

Who?

Many school districts develop an Advisory/Steering/Project Committee for the site selection process that is responsible for making key decisions (see Step 2). The Advisory Committee may decide to hire a consultant to perform many of the tasks or may take on the tasks themselves.

How?

1) Complete an inventory of school facilities and district owned sites, documenting maintenance needs and capacity.
2) Understand community growth patterns and regulations; ask city/county personnel key questions.
3) Develop population projections for school aged children ; make sure that the projections coincide with those used by the city/county.
4) Define the need based on background research (inventory, growth patterns, etc.).
5) Develop a vision for the school siting process.

Step 2

Identify Stakeholders and Engage the Community

Why?

Involving the community in the siting process can have short-term and long-term benefits for the school district and local government. If the community is involved and listened to, the school site and design will better meet its needs and be responsive to its desires. Community members/agencies may have ideas that the school district did not originally consider that could maximize resources and better integrate the school into the community. If satisfied with the process and product, residents may be more likely to vote for the next bond measure and stay involved with the school and community.

Who?

Consider involving the following types of people in Advisory Committee or in other public involvement activities:

- School District Personnel (superintendent, school facility planners, school transportation officers)
- City and/or county planners
- Transportation planners
- Architects
- Transportation engineers
- Historic preservation planners
- Park and recreation planners
- Youth organizers
- Parents
- Developers
- Students
- Public health advocates
- Neighborhood association members
- Public relations specialists
- Business Owners
- Nonprofit Personnel (YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Club, Senior Services)

How?

There are a number of ways to involve the public in the siting process. School districts will need to think strategically about the appropriate activities for and duration of their involvement. Examples include:

- Siting Advisory Committee
- Citizen Oversight Committee
- Design workshops
- Open houses
- Newsletters, brochures
- Surveys

How Can the City or County be Involved?

Many communities recommend having a city/county planner participate in the Siting Advisory Committee. This person can help the committee navigate through what can be a challenging labyrinth of city/county ordinances and regulations. City/county representatives should plan on attending design workshops and focus group sessions to contribute to the process and to listen to what the school district and the community values.

Step 3

Identify, Evaluate, and Select Sites

Why?

Conducting an inventory of viable sites (including renovation/expansion of existing sites) ensures that all options are considered. Some districts may only have one or two sites to choose from; however, when there are several sites, a set of evaluating criteria is helpful in making decisions.

Who?

School Siting Advisory Committee, city/county personnel, if not on advisory committee.

How?

Consider the following criteria when choosing a school site:

Land Use

- Renovation/expansion potential
- Land use compatibility
- Proximity to future development
- Proximity to community facilities
- Site availability
- Size of site
- Proximity to students
- Reuse of infrastructure

Costs

- Land costs
- Construction costs
- Site maintenance costs
- Off-site costs

Transportation/Accessibility

- Pedestrian and bicycle accessibility
- Availability of parking
- Vehicular access to site
- Drop-off and pick-up traffic loads

Environmental

- Presence of wetlands or endangered species
- Suitable soil types
- Vulnerability to natural hazards
- Presence of hazardous substances
- Topography

How Can the City or County be Involved?

City/county planning staff can assist in three specific ways:

- **Point out areas of potential population growth and/or decline:** Cities are required to plan for the next 20 years. Discussing the jurisdiction's long-range plans will help school districts know where to secure land for the future.
- **Identify vacant parcels and discuss attributes:** Most communities have an up-to-date computer database of vacant land that describes important parcel characteristics, such as size of site, type of zoning, presence of wetlands or environmentally sensitive areas, and floodplains. Access to this data streamlines and better informs the process.
- **Discuss joint use potentials or important adjacencies:** If asked, the city may jointly purchase land with the school district to co-locate facilities such as a park or community center. City officials should also discuss with the school district the overall vision for the community and identify how schools contribute to that vision through strategic planning.

Frequently Asked Questions
about Land Use Planning and School Facility Planning

Because of their relationship, it is important that local governments and school districts understand each other's approach to planning. Some basic information can help demystify the process. The following section is a short primer about land use and school facility planning.

West Salem High School, Salem, OR

What to Know...

What are the key components of land use planning?

Comprehensive Plan: The official document adopted by a local government which sets forth the general, long range policies on how the community's future development should occur.

Zoning Ordinance: A set of land use regulations to create districts within which the type, location, density, bulk, height, and lot coverage of land use are controlled.

Facilities Plans: Plans that address specific municipal services such as water, sewer, stormwater, transportation, and parks.

What is land use planning?

Land use planning is the process through which local governments provide for the current and future land needs of a community. It takes into account both public and private interests and tries to balance the "public interest" (e.g., public health, safety, and welfare) with private property rights. While cities and counties in Oregon are required by law to adopt land-use plans, they engage in planning for other reasons as well.

Since 1973, Oregon has maintained a strong statewide program for land use planning (See Oregon Revised Statutes Chapter 197 and Oregon Administrative Rules Chapter 660). The foundation of the program is 19 statewide planning goals that are implemented at the local level through comprehensive plans. The goals reflect five general themes: involvement of people, protecting farm and forest lands, managing rural and urban development, protecting natural resources, and managing coastal and ocean resources.

What is a comprehensive plan?

Comprehensive land use plans are the primary tool local governments use to implement planning goals developed and supported by Oregonians. A comprehensive plan is an official document adopted by a city or county that sets forth the general, long-range policies on how the community's future development should occur. Comprehensive plans are long-range (usually 20 years) and provide a physical guide to development: the how, why, when and where to build, rebuild, or preserve a community. By state law, all incorporated cities and counties must have comprehensive plans that are consistent with the 19 statewide planning goals.

Where can schools be located in a community?

Communities use the zoning ordinance (sometimes called the "development code") to control the type, location, density, and design of development. A zoning district prescribes allowable uses and a list of conditional uses (uses that have a greater impact and thus merit a higher level of review).

Schools are usually treated as conditional uses in residential districts. Conditional uses require the applicant (in this instance, the school district) to apply for a conditional use permit. The conditional use permit application usually requires the school district to conduct a traffic impact study and other analyses.

School districts face trade-offs when siting schools in areas outside urban growth boundaries (UGB). State statutes prohibit development of urban services (e.g., water, sewer, etc.) in rural areas; therefore, schools must be built within the urban growth boundary to receive city services such as water and sewer. If the district wants to build a school outside the UGB, the district must pay for its own infrastructure. This may require digging a well, developing a septic system, and building roads to connect the site. If a district wants to site a school within three miles of the urban growth boundary, it must apply for an exception based on ORS 197.732.

Urban Growth Boundaries

One of the key provisions of the statewide planning program is establishment of Urban Growth Boundaries (UGBs) as required by statewide planning Goal 14 (Urbanization). A UGB is a tool intended to foster efficient land use and complete, well-functioning communities. The UGB is simply a line drawn on planning and zoning maps to indicate where a city will grow. Land outside the urban growth boundary is rural and generally lacks urban services like sewers. Land outside UGBs is used primarily for farming, forestry, or rural residential development.

Can cities impose a moratorium on growth because of inadequate school capacity?

No. State law (ORS 197.505 to 197.540) explicitly prohibits local government's ability to restrict development based on school capacity. If new development occurs, the school district must decide how it will accommodate the new students by either expanding existing schools, building new schools, or by reconfiguring school attendance areas.

Can a city expand its urban growth boundary because there is not enough land for schools?

Maybe. Expanding an urban growth boundary can be a complicated and contentious process. To expand a UGB for a school site, the city would need to make a "special needs" argument consistent with the public facilities and services factor of statewide planning Goal 14. The application must identify clear standards for required school sites and must demonstrate that viable alternative sites do not exist within the UGB.

Do the Federal or Oregon Departments of Education have roles in school siting decisions?

No. Neither the Federal nor Oregon Department of Education governs school siting. Decisions are made by local school boards with land use review by the appropriate local government. Local school districts are required to fund their own construction of schools without help from the state.

Photo courtesy of ODOT Photo and Video Services

How do the powers of school districts and city/county governments compare?

All states have enabling legislation that allows for the creation of "special districts" that are generally geared towards specific services. These special districts are granted some, but not all, of the same powers as a city/county government.

In Oregon, the school district has complete independence to levy taxes without external review or approval from municipalities. The independent taxing authority of the school district removes it from any prior review process that cities or counties may have; however, the district, like any other developer, must still secure land use approval from the city or county for developing new schools.

Similar to cities/counties, school districts have the power of eminent domain, which gives them the authority to condemn property for school purposes. As with all eminent domain purchases, the school district must pay fair market value for the land. School districts rarely use this because of the negative public relations of taking land for public facilities.

Each school district has a specific service boundary; however, school district boundaries do not necessarily follow the same boundaries as municipalities. In 2004, Oregon had 197 school districts and 241 incorporated cities.

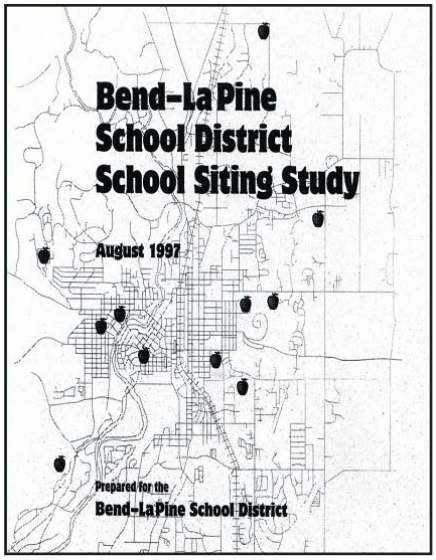
The Impact of Ballot Measures 5, 47, and 50

In 1990, Oregon voters passed Ballot Measure 5, which capped property taxes at $15 per $1000 of assessed value. School districts were capped at $5 per $1000 of assessed valuation. The key impact of Ballot Measure 5, from a school funding perspective, is that the limitation shifted school funding from local districts to the state. In 1996, voters passed Ballot Measure 47—the cut and cap legislation. The Oregon state legislature amended Ballot Measure 47 with Ballot Measure 50. The key provision is that it limits increases of property assessments to 3% per year. While Ballot Measures 5, 47, and 50 have had a profound impact on how school operations are funded, they have not had a significant affect on how school districts fund capital improvements.

How do school districts finance construction and maintenance of school facilities?

The primary source school districts use to fund capital projects is through voter-approved, general obligation (GO) bonds. School districts issue general obligation bonds secured by future property tax levies. Under Oregon law, passage of bond levies requires at least a 50 percent voter turnout as well as the majority of the votes in favor (the so-called "double majority"). However, bond levies proposed in the general election in even numbered years have no turnout requirement. In addition to GO bonds, school districts can use general fund revenues which come from the state. Most districts, however, use general fund revenues solely for operations.

Do school districts have to create school facility plans?



Although the State Department of Education does not have a direct role in school siting, the state has enacted legislation pertinent to school siting and planning. ORS 195.110 mandates that counties or cities work with the school district to develop facility plans if they contain at least one of the following characteristics: (1) a high growth school district; (2) light rail planning; or (3) the addition of 1,000 or more residential units in a year. The school facility plan must also be incorporated as an element in local comprehensive plans. "High growth districts" are those where enrollment exceeds 5,000 students and with at least 6% growth over the three most recent school years.

Are there acreage standards for school sites?

Yes and no. The State of Oregon does not impose acreage standards on school districts. School districts, however, may adopt their own standards. Many states and school districts consider the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI) the expert on school facilities and follow acreage formulas previously recommended by CEFPI. The 2004 edition of this organization's guide retracts the previous recommendations and acknowledges that the past "rule of thumb does not take into consideration variations in educational programs or the difficulties in obtaining sizeable tracts of land in densely populated areas." Instead, it now suggests calculating the amount of space needed based on program criteria.

Do schools have to meet certain square footage requirements to maintain accreditation?

The Northwest Association of Accredited Schools is the federally recognized school accreditation body for Oregon. Its standards do not specify maximum capacities for schools or minimum square footage per student.

Are schools required to provide busing?

Oregon school districts are required to provide transportation for elementary school students who live more than one mile from school and for secondary school students who live more than 1.5 miles from school (ORS 327.043(1)). School districts can amend these limits and provide transportation for students because of health or safety reasons, including special education. Supplemental plans express these amendments and need the approval of the State Board of Education (OAR 581-023-0040(1)(d)). The state reimburses districts for expenditures for home-to-school, school-to-home and other instruction-related trips for students. In 2003-04 the state established a three-tier system based on district transportation costs per student. The top 10% of districts with the highest transportation costs are reimbursed at a rate of 90%; the next highest 10% are reimbursed at a rate of 80%; and the remaining 80% of districts are reimbursed at a rate of 70%. The state of Oregon expects to spend $135 million for student transportation in 2004-05. This does not include private transportation costs paid by families/students.

For more information...

Department of Land Conservation and Development (http://lcd.state.or.us)

Oregon Revised Statutes, Chapter 197 (www.leg.state.or.us/ors/197.html)

Chapter 195 (www.leg.state.or.us/ors/195.html)

West Salem High School, Salem, OR

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www.citiesandschools.org

Council of Educational Facilities Planners International (CEFPI)
www.cefpi.org

National Center for Education Statistics
www.nces.ed.gov

National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities
www.edfacilities.org

Smart Schools Smart Growth Initiative
www.smart-schools.org

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(Michigan Land Use Institute)
www.mlui.org/downloads/hardlessons.pdf

Linking School Siting to Land Use Planning
(Atlanta Regional Commission)
http://www.atlantaregional.com/qualitygrowth/SCHOOLS_TOOL.PDF

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www.realtor.org/sg3.nsf/Pages/winter05sprawl?OpenDocument

Primer on School Planning and Coordination
(Florida Department of Community Affairs)
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Schools as Centers of Community: A Citizens' Guide to Planning and Design
(National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities)
www.edfacilities.org/pubs/centers_of_community.cfm

Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting
(U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)
www.epa.gov/livability/pdf/school_travel.pdf

Why Johnny Can't Walk to School
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