



Georgia Planning Officials Newsletter

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School Buildings and Community Building

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In October 2005, a headline in the *Arizona Republic* read: "No Students Attend Tombstone School." The article provided a lesson in the many potential pitfalls of school planning conducted in isolation from community planning.

The new high school in Tombstone, Arizona could not accept new students because the unpaved road leading to it was considered unsafe for school buses. Located on a 57-acre site in the desert miles from the town it served, the school sat empty while local school officials tried to find funding to pave the road. The project was already over budget, due in part to the fact there were no gas, electric or fiber-optic lines to the site.

This is an extreme but instructive example of a problem common in jurisdictions across the country—inadequate communication and coordination between school districts and local governments.

School Spending—What is it Buying?

Investments in educational facilities represent one of the largest capital outlays many local governments make. Across the country thousands of schools will be built or renovated in the coming years. Decisions about the construction and renovation of these schools will have important implications for their communities – planning commissioners should understand and care about how these decisions are being made.

Schools are often exempt from local zoning regulations. In some places decisions about whether to build a new building or renovate an older structure, as well as where to build schools, are made by school officials independent of planning departments or other local government influence. While school districts should take the lead on school siting, it should not do so without input from the rest of the government. To do so otherwise is often a recipe for bad investment.

This is Where Planning Commissioners Come into Play

A first rate education is the primary consideration in school facility decisions, but progressive and forward-thinking communities and planning commissions are achieving multiple goals – educational, health, environmental, economic, social and fiscal – with these investments.

These goals allow for the opportunity to form coalitions with educators, citizens and groups who are organized around a wider range of issues and should prove to be willing partners in any effort that could result in better education investments. Working with these coalitions, planning commissions can influence school planning.

Without assessing blame, most planning commissioners would probably agree that many of the problems encountered in the Tombstone case could have been avoided or alleviated by better communication and planning between the school district and local government before the site was purchased. If this communication is lacking in your community, you can lay the groundwork for improvement and make this one of the most effective actions you will take to improve your community over time.

School Siting and Smart Growth

<http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/schools.htm>

Over the next few decades, thousands of schools around the country will be built and renovated. Where and how schools are built will profoundly affect the communities they serve and the quality of their air and water.

While a first-rate education in a safe facility must always be the primary consideration when making school spending decisions, a growing number of communities are using these investments to meet multiple goals -- educational, health, environmental, economic, social, and fiscal.

Many communities that are reevaluating their growth patterns are also assessing how and where they spend their education dollars. Investments in schools both respond to and influence growth. Although challenging, the boom in school construction offers an unprecedented opportunity to improve the quality of schools and communities together, by applying the principles of smart growth to educational facility planning.

Smart growth development:

- Conserves resources and land;
- Offers choices in housing, transportation, shopping, recreation, and jobs;
- Encourages community collaboration; and
- Fosters distinctive, attractive neighborhoods.

Educators who support community-centered schools share many of these principles. A school that is safe and easy for students, teachers, parents, and other community members to reach on foot or by bicycle helps reduce the air pollution from automobile use, protecting children's health. Building schools compactly and in the neighborhoods they serve minimizes the amount of paved surface they create, which can help protect water quality by reducing polluted runoff.

The following is an excerpt on the issues associated with the school and community planning.

We want to hear from you! Please send us your thoughts, experiences and advice on being a Planning Official. E-mail or fax your submissions to Robbie Hayes at rhayes@atlantaregional.com or 404.463.3105