

Hans Bauman
Chair, Reed Expansion Project BLPC

January 30, 2018

Arlington County School Board
Dr. Patrick Murphy, Superintendent

Dear School Board Members and Dr. Murphy,

The Reed Expansion Project Building Level Planning Committee (BLPC) is pleased to offer our response to the six concept designs developed in collaboration with APS, VMDO, and Arlington County. Though the Charge requests comments on three options, a total of six are being brought for your consideration. As detailed below, there is a clear consensus opinion for the **Integrated Scheme** and we hope the School Board approves moving forward with this concept.

The Process

The BLPC and Public Facilities Review Committee (PFRC) met six times between October 2017 and January 2018 to provide guidance to the staff and architects charged with developing the Reed site and to review and refine design concepts. There were also several site tours as well as an open Community Meeting in January.

The committee meetings were well attended and characterized by lively, active participation by all members. We were consistently impressed by staff's commitment to the public engagement process and by VMDO's expertise, not only in architecture and design but also in their strong support of Arlington's unique public processes. Early design exercises helped committee members experience the difficulty in balancing competing interests and paved the way for understanding design choices more deeply later in the Concept Phase.

Early on, the decision was made that during the Concept Phase all meetings would be joint PFRC-BLPC meetings. This choice has served the process well and we would recommend repeating this kind joint process for future schools projects to continue improved collaboration and coordination between APS and County entities.

During the course of this process, certain themes became apparent and drove the committee's convergence on a single concept that best balances these (sometimes competing) design drivers. There are also site realities which constrained potentially promising alternatives.

Design Themes

1) *Optimized learning environments*

Of primary importance to the committee was to create a student-centric learning environment. During the concept phase, this meant a bias toward more tightly integrated school campus designs, versus ones with expansive/disconnected buildings. It also favored concepts that enabled modern flexible school designs and site designs with reduced classroom/activity transit times.

2) *Community green space and amenities*

The play fields, shade trees, and sledding hill that sprawl across the eastern section of the site constitute critical resources for school users, the surrounding neighborhoods, and the County generally. Arlington has high demand for play fields and the committee pushed for designs which retained field space and preserved tree canopy. We consistently favored more compact designs over those with larger footprints.

3) *Proximity to the Westover commercial district*

The Westover commercial district is a unique community asset that the surrounding neighborhoods and our committee strongly support. The residential and business communities of Westover are highly concerned over the increased traffic congestion and parking challenges that will result from our development of the Reed site. Any site design will need to create traffic flows and parking solutions which help mitigate these impacts and support the vibrancy of this unique neighborhood.

Site Realities

1) *Underground utility lines*

There is a major storm sewer line which runs directly through the site, adjacent to the current single-story Children's School building. Given the prohibitive, multi-million-dollar cost of relocating this sewer line, all designs were forced to avoid this approximately 60' right-of-way through the site, either dividing designs across it or onto either side of this wide swath. On the positive side, this right-of-way essentially follows an existing residential pedestrian path; our inability to develop in this area effectively forced preservation of this vital community route through the middle of the site.

2) *Traffic and parking concerns*

The thriving Westover commercial district, the County library, and the major arterial Washington Boulevard are all within a stone's throw of the Reed site. Even with the current, more limited APS usage of the Reed site, the surrounding community struggles with traffic and parking impacts. The addition of 500+ seats to this busy area is quite distressing to many neighbors. Parent and staff access to and parking at the site – as well as school bus access points – still need to be fully developed. These issues continue

to be the major stumbling block for this project, will be the sole focus of an upcoming meeting, and will need to be further addressed in future design stages.

3) *The architecture of the Children's School*

The Children's School is just one portion of the expansive 2009 project that created one contiguous building that includes the new library, the historic Reed Elementary facade, the Children's School, and several smaller programs. The single-story Children's School was designed specifically for a pre-K program, incorporating smaller rooms, narrow labyrinthine hallways, and curved spaces. Though appropriate for early childhood, replicating this design upwards for older children would not be desirable.

Further, when the Children's School was built, promises were made that a second story could be built atop the existing one-story structure. Initially, the committee was biased towards designs that built atop and replicated the existing structure. However, it became clear that the costs of peeling off the roof to "build up" would be very high, thanks to late-phase, unexpected construction choices during that 2009 remodel. Certainly, the community has wrestled with concepts that propose partial demolition of a bond-funded building that was completed less than 10 years ago.

4) *Past commitments*

When the Westover County Library and Children's School were re-developed about ten years ago, expectations were set that only a limited number of APS students would be accommodated at Reed. Times have changed and Arlington needs more seats; nonetheless, neighbors worry about the additional impact of a full-sized elementary school. The neighboring communities have urged us to not exceed the 725 students specified by the Charge.

The Design Concepts

Six concepts were explored in some detail by the committee and the decision was made to present all six of these to the School Board. These options are: Upper Lower Scheme, Standalone Scheme, Integrated Scheme, Bridge Scheme, East Scheme, North Scheme.

On January 24, 2018, the BLPC and the PFRC performed a secret ballot ranking exercise of the six options. The meeting had very high attendance by both committees. The overwhelming preference for the Integrated Scheme by both committees was consistent with the subjective conversations the larger group has been having for months.

Table 1. January 24, 2018 BLPC ranking results

Weighted score: Schemes were given 6 points for a 1st place ranking, 5 for 2nd place, 4 for 3rd, etc.

Rank	Scheme	Score
1	Integrated	125
2	Bridge	78
3	Upper Lower	76
4	Standalone	55
5	North	48
6	East	34

Further, the ranking was simply a 1-6 listing exercise and does not capture the spirit of the discussion which for many members was “I know I want to rank Integrated first, but all the other options are so much less desirable that I don’t know how to order them.” In hindsight, a weighted ranking might have been useful. For instance: “Distribute 10 points among three or more options.” Such a modification would likely have differentiated the Integrated Scheme’s score even more clearly and should be considered for future ranking exercises.

Significantly, the PFRC’s scoring of the options is almost identical to the BLPC’s ranking, with the exception of the two lowest ranked Schemes, North and East, being switched.

1. Integrated Scheme

This scheme rose as the clear front-runner midway through the Concept Phase. If the BLPC had been charged with recommending only one option, clearly this would be it. Cost estimates place it approximately on budget, it has the least impact on green space, and it allows the architects to design an optimal learning environment for future students. It also requires the least number of parking spaces and can be designed to be the most energy efficient.

The Integrated Scheme best balances the competing themes above. By demolishing the current one-story building, it allows VMDO to design a new structure that incorporates best practices learning environments without being constrained by choices made specifically for a pre-K program. Though larger, the footprint of this Scheme is generally within the bounds of the current Children’s School wing and only encroaches minimally on the existing green space and field usages. Parking and traffic are concerns with this (and every other) concept, though by concentrating the building to the west of the right-of-way, it allows more options for addressing the parking concerns.

The estimated cost of this option is not the lowest and the per-seat cost is higher than some of the other concepts. Nonetheless, the committees strongly support this option despite those cost drivers, as the positives listed above make it clearly worth the additional investment.

From a design perspective, the only significant concern was around the required height of this building, especially relatively to current and adjacent constructions. As a trade-off for increased green space and idealized learning environments, a potentially four-story building continued to get strong support from the committees. Educators also commented that taller buildings are more efficient for transit times than wide schools, so the four-story building was actually seen as plus from an educational perspective.

The committee struggled with supporting a design that proposed demolition of a significant portion of a relatively recent, publicly bond-funded building. For weeks, the group avoided even considering this alternative. But once the required educational and green space trade-offs with the other designs became clear, almost every BLPC member ranked this concept as their first choice.

Near the end of the Concept Phase, a concern was raised around the legality of partial demolition of the existing building, especially if the bonds were still outstanding. APS staff has consulted with their legal teams and there is no legal concern with the proposed partial demolition. There is still a political issue, of course, which I believe can be partially mitigated by offering transparency to our process and the journey we took as a committee from being skeptical of this alternative to embracing it as our preferred concept design. We are trading partial demolition of a relatively new building for better learning environments and the preservation of green space. I believe thoughtful Arlingtonians would agree that this is an acceptable trade-off.

2. Bridge Scheme

This scheme was appreciated because it honors the promise to “build up” over The Children’s School and expands the learning environment in a “connected” way without too much increase in the height of the building façade.

However, it spreads the school across a very broad area, making for unacceptable transit times for certain student transitions and with significant impact to the fields and open space. It also duplicates the current sub-optimal pre-K classroom footprints onto a second floor. The “bridge” over the County right-of-way will require careful negotiation and engineering to be viable. For approximately the same construction cost, the BLPC supports the Integrated Scheme over this design.

Significantly, though the weighted score ranked this scheme second, a majority of its votes came from committee members ranking it 3rd or 4th.

3. Upper Lower Scheme

This scheme is probably our “mid-cost” option and received the most combined 2nd and 3rd place rankings by committee members. It avoids expanding/duplicating the existing school structure and creates a new upper school which can be optimally designed for those grade levels on a somewhat smaller footprint.

There are significant concerns over how a bifurcated school would effectively operate and build school community. Especially unclear is how such a divided campus would accommodate the inevitable changes in distribution of students at various grade levels. This scheme paves over an additional 20,000 SF of green space (vs the Integrated Scheme), eliminating green and open space while creating an expansive school campus that inefficiently sprawls across the site. As one member of the public commented: it requires “too many compromises without enough benefit.”

4. Standalone Scheme

Interestingly, 75% of the committee either ranked this scheme 2nd after Integrated or dead last at 6th. That outcome matches the discussions in the room: this scheme was either seen as a potentially compelling way of finding hundreds of more seats for only a marginally larger investment... or it was seen as a violation of charter and trust to even seriously consider this design, especially since its cost is higher than the Charge’s maximum. Its continued inclusion as part of this process has been quite controversial, as it brings almost 40% more users and usage to an area that was already bracing itself for more traffic and loss of public space with the original, more limited scope.

The Standalone delivers 270 more seats than the required 725 for only a few million dollars more, driving the per-seat costs down significantly and creating much needed seats for future use. It would also allow APS to build an entirely new school, freed from the design constraints associated with attaching it to the existing Reed structure.

However, this scheme would decimate the open space so highly valued by the larger community and bring a huge increase in site traffic and parking requirements over the other alternatives. Much of the open field space would effectively be eliminated and construction would likely extend into the County parcel at the southeast corner.

Some in the neighborhood remember a decade-old promise to only build a 400 seat school. If APS pursues not just doubling but almost tripling that figure, the School Board will need to steel itself for significant community push back. The 4th place ranking of this scheme does not properly capture the strong opposition by some to this scheme. The current process did not ameliorate those concerns.

5. North Scheme

This scheme was the early frontrunner, as it attempted to concentrate new development to the west of the troublesome right-of-way and minimized impacts on the fields. However, this design quickly lost supporters once it became clear how many hillside trees would need to be removed and the growing concerns over building up/duplicating the existing Children’s School layout. County fire officials stating that a building in this location would not allow sufficient fire access was the death knell for the North Scheme.

6. East Scheme

The East Scheme is our “low cost” option and alas also the lowest ranked by the committee. The cost savings simply weren’t worth the other tradeoffs. It divides the elementary school community across two distant buildings, eats up significant green space (including the highly valued “sledding hill), and has the second highest impervious area impact after the Standalone Scheme. It does move the school’s traffic and parking impacts furthest away from Westover core area.

Conclusion

The School Board’s Charge to the BLPC directed us to collaborate in the design of three alternative concept designs and to deliver our response to those designs at the end of the Concept Phase. I believe we had all hoped to find three concept designs that were each reasonably compelling at the three price points requested by the Charge. After many months of work, the group has collectively developed six alternatives. Despite our best efforts to remain impartial and keep everything on the table, the BLPC and the PFRC coalesced around one single scheme as clearly the most compelling: the Integrated Scheme.

The Integrated Scheme comes in at budget and enables us to build a highly energy efficient building with world-class teaching and learning environments, all while preserving as much green and open space as possible. While we understand that the School Board must make their own decision, the consensus of the BLPC committee was clear.

I’d like to recognize and thank all the members of the BLPC for their steadfast commitment to the process and their engaged participation in many hours of meetings. I’d also like to give a shout out to the many spouses, partners, and families who make the continued participation of so many Arlington activists and staff possible. We couldn’t do this work without them.

Thank you for your commitment to doing what’s best for all of Arlington students. I appreciate the difficult decisions you make on our behalf on a regular basis. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to help shape and comment on the Reed Expansion Project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hans Bauman', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Hans Bauman
Chair, Reed Expansion Project BLPC