

November 15, 2015

Arlington County School Board
Arlington Education Center
1426 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, Virginia 22207

Re: BLPC Clarifications & Recommendations on Stratford Concept Design for 1000 Seats by 2019

Dear School Board Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to share the Stratford BLPC recommendation during your November 5th board meeting. Most BLPC members attended in person, watched the proceedings or pored over the detailed notes from one of our members. You raised several questions we would like to respond to, so that you may benefit from the thousands of hours we have spent so far studying and debating each issue to come up with the best concept we can for this challenging project.

In the details below you will find the BLPC's additional clarification on our recommendations, to:

- 1) Carry a maximum project budget of \$36.3M for schematic design, to support selective renovation and adequate common spaces.
- 2) Proceed to schematic design now, so we can meet CIP Commitments to add at least 1000 middle school seats by 2019.
- 3) Provide needed safety improvements for fire/emergency, handicapped and pedestrian access to the school, including the "high road" driveway.

Process to date

After countless hours of community engagement in 2013 and 2013, in December 2014 the school board passed a CIP including a 1000 seat Stratford middle school. In February 2015 you appointed an unusually large BLPC including 1-2 representatives from each of surrounding civic associations, elementary school PTAs, middle school administrators, HALRB representatives, County staff representing transportation, parks, facilities, and architectural and transportation consultants. This group has met for up to four hours every other week since April--while doing hundreds of hours of independent study and community engagement in the background. We have hotly debated and relooked at data, poked holes in recommendations and assumptions, and requested further data analysis and clarification. We have, at times, questioned all of the same recommendations and asked the same questions that you are asking today. But in the end, we came to this highly informed, albeit imperfect solution, that we hope you will support. There is not a perfect solution. Trust us, and please agree with us that the recommended option is superior among all of the options available.

Ultimately, with the very apparent challenges of history, topography and access to contend with, we have many times need to return to our charge: opening a school for 1000 students (with study of the potential for 1300 students) by Fall 2019. While there are many options and considerations that could make this project easier, they are simply not a reality for this project. There are tremendous concessions we have needed to make in scope, space, aesthetics and environmental impact, and yet, this still remains the best option. Why? Because we have at least 1000 second, third and fourth graders who need to walk through these doors on September 3, 2019, and thousands of others who look forward to regaining just a bit of breathing room at their schools. Many of these children are family members or neighbors; all of them are our kids,

your kids. As of today, they are currently in or will soon be in temporary relocatables sitting on top of planned open space, potentially for their entire middle and high school careers if we do not move forward now. Many of us also have children who are finishing their elementary school years in trailers and are in, or headed to, Swanson or Williamsburg in overcrowded conditions. We therefore have first-hand knowledge of and experience with precisely the situation that the entire Stratford project was designed to eliminate.

BLPC members and contributors have shared literally thousands of hours and their cross-disciplinary expertise to research, debate, study and engage with the community on this important investment for Arlington. From 10,000 feet it is easy to hope there must be another solution. We have shared clear, reasoned recommendations and remain available to answer your questions at all hours. But we need your vote to proceed and get these seats in place by 2019.

On Monday, you are voting on concept design. This is simply the green light to take our concept of building an addition on the west of the building, with the massing our architects have been paid hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to study and propose. We have already lost time while costs were studied and restudied these last few months. After you vote this week we will have three months to work through schematic design, maximizing space and cost efficiency to design a school that fosters the whole child and serves Arlington taxpayers well. We have already returned to the proverbial drawing board four times, with new specifications and further challenges to overcome. This is the best solution at concept phase. We ask you to vote “yes” and green light our move to schematic design.

Clarifications on BLPC Recommendations

With that in mind, we would like to clarify or address a few concerns raised in the last School Board work session and through discussions with the community on Phasing Options, Budget vs. Scope and Safety and Accessibility so that you can make this decision with the best facts in front of you.

1. Budget vs. Scope: As we highlighted in our November 3rd concept design recommendation, the BLPC does not support the staff-recommended project cost reduction to \$31.3M. Instead, we ask that you plan for a maximum project cost of \$36.3M. The proposed cost reductions go beyond reducing to “bare bones” and instead would have APS build a subpar addition on this “build-once” site by:

- Reducing addition by 25% (from 45,000 SF to 35,000 SF)
- Eliminating proposed renovations to make better daily use of and flow within the historic building and its three previous renovations
- Settling for an elongated building with multiple add-ons – an addition to an addition to a historic building - without the investment to optimize those connections. Simply put, Arlington community members of all ages and future School Board members will wonder why we failed to invest wisely when we did this addition and will face extraordinary expense to undo and redo to meet future needs.

Keep in mind that even before schematic design has begun, this project has already endured significant scope reductions due to budget cuts, including:

- At site selection in 2014, the project cost was estimated at \$29M-\$56M. You chose to plan for the lowest end of the range, \$29M.
- We have since learned safety, topography, transit/safety and environmental mitigation costs are unusually high (as they were when the site was first developed in 1950);
- Local and national construction costs have escalated unusually quickly since site selection

Further, Stratford after its final renovation with this reduced scope would be left with some of the smallest common spaces of any middle school in the system, making future accommodation of peak enrollments in temporary relocatables extremely challenging. Current common spaces at all middle schools include¹:

APS Middle Schools - Program Comparisons

School	# Students	Building sf	Cafeteria sf	Gym sf	Media Ctr sf	Theater sf
Jefferson	869	219,070	9,340	67,800	3,603	14,100
Gunston	880	209,212	7,720	14,582	5,25	10,825
Kenmore	885	206,188	6,658	12,055	4,480	4,762
Swanson	1,006	132,158	4,560	12,560	3,107	3,762
Williamsburg	1,075	170,865	6,790	9,055	4,687	4,600
Existing Stratford	691	138,000	4,050	7,100	2,500	3,580
Stratford (1000 seats, 35k sf addn)	1,000	172,000	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD
Stratford (1000 seats, 45k sf addn)	1,000	182,000	5,650	9,700	4,900	3,580
Stratford (1300 seats)	1,300	TBD	6,100	12,100	4,900	3,580

Note: Building SqFt does not include relocatables. The Jefferson Gym and Theater are shared community facilities. Areas references from APS Building Conditions Surveys.

Please do the right thing for Arlington’s past, present and future and carry a maximum project budget of \$36.3M for schematic design. We on the BLPC commit to doing our part to maximize the value of those funds through every recommendation we make.

2. Access/Safety

BLPC, PFRC and APS staff have all recommended a "high road" driveway from Vacation Lane to a traffic light at Old Dominion, to separate vehicular from pedestrian and bike traffic around the school.

There are three primary safety benefits:

Fire/Emergency Access

Virginia and international building codes require fire lane access to buildings. Typically this surface needs to be engineered to support fire trucks, all-weather accessible and at least 20 feet wide, within 30 feet of the building. The easiest way (and possibly the only way) to do this is with a driveway from Vacation Lane to the West addition.

Today fire and ambulances respond to the building in the bus loop and work their way through the building to the location of the emergency. (At last week’s BLPC meeting, an ambulance responding to a medical emergency in the gymnasium parked in the bus circle then traveled the length of the building to locate the patient. This provides a timely reminder of how critical this driveway will be to safety at the Stratford Middle School.)

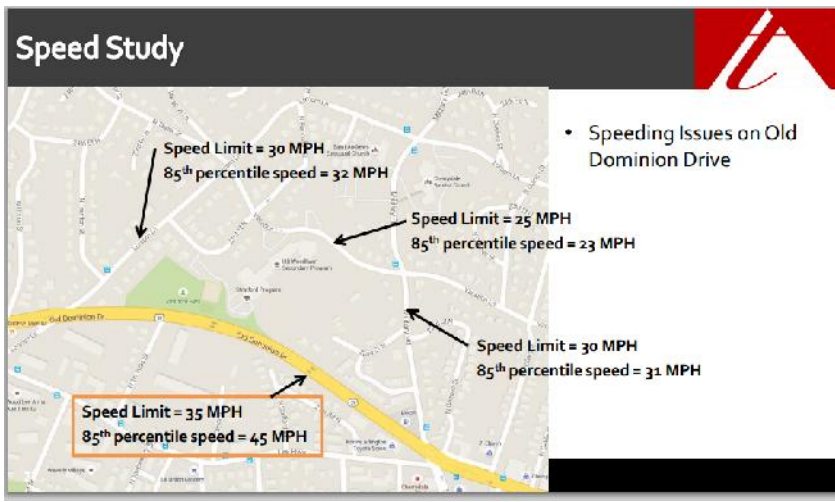
Universal Design/Accessibility

We envision the new addition as main gathering space for the school, the site of arrivals, dining, recreation and many classrooms. Every student and visitor, regardless of mobility, should be able to use it. The recommended driveway enables students and visitors with limited mobility to enter the building alongside their peers, rather than through a steep, trash/service entry at the back of the building.

¹ August 3, 2015 BLPC Presentation, p. 29

Reduced Risk of Pedestrian/Cyclist Injury or Fatalities

From the extensive work by Toole Design, our traffic and transport consultant, we learned that separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic is required to make this a safe and walker-friendly site and is a standard goal for transportation planning in the context of schools. This site is literally surrounded by three major commuter routes with speeds regularly ranging from 30-45 mph during school drop off time. Pedestrian fatality rates jump from 5% at 20 mph to 40% at 30 mph and 80% at 40mph. In addition, at the higher speeds, accidents occur more often since drivers do not see pedestrians in time to stop. The surrounding hilly and winding roads have limited visibility and posted speed limits of 25 to 35 mph, with higher speeds occurring routinely.. For instance, 15% of cars travelling over 45mph on Old Dominion, where the highest volume of students will be walking/biking along or crossing. In 2013, 15,000 children were injured while walking or bicycling in the U.S. while 288 were killed. Let none of those stats be on our watch.



While we hope to encourage students to walk, parents rightfully worry about these sorts of statistics. Stratford is on their commuter routes to work and we have to assume some will drive middle school students particularly given early start times and in foul weather. At Williamsburg and HB today, only 32-34% students zoned to walk arrive on foot or bicycle; 56-58% are driven to school. This is not just an Arlington trend. Nationally, just 13% of children aged 5 to 14 usually walked or biked to school in 2009, vs. 48% in 1969. With safer routes and separated bus, car and pedestrian routes, we can continue our work to effectively encourage and support students and staff in walking and biking to school. Without them, more will drive and the challenges will only grow.

The new school will increase vehicular trips, particularly in the morning drop off peak. Toole Design Group's numbers assume an average mix of walk and bus-zoned students. They show the peak morning traffic doubling, from 364 to 705 trips, due to:

1. increasing student population, from ~750 to 1000, and
2. concentrating arrivals in one peak (vs. two today for H-B/Stratford).

In addition, the BLPC has encouraged APS to consider a third factor, how many students are likely to be zoned for bus service at the school. If the school is mostly walk-zoned (estimates were 75-100% walk zoned during CIP site selection in 2014), then the morning peak would likely triple, making an already challenging safety situation much worse.²

While the driveway connecting Vacation and Old Dominion is not free, much of the cost is unavoidable. Unless unusual exceptions are made to local and state building codes, the cost of the driveway is likely to be incurred partially in any case, since both a fire lane along the school and an access to Old Dominion will be needed during construction. While permanent fire access could be met with a fire lane from Vacation Lane to the West addition (skipping the connection to Old Dominion), costs would likely be similar since a large fire truck turnaround plaza would be needed. In addition, such

² Source: APS Go,11/5/15 board meeting presentation, Stratford PFRC summary August 2015, Virginia and International building codes, <http://humantransport.org/sidewalks/SpeedKills.htm>, http://guide.saferoutesinfo.org/introduction/the_decline_of_walking_and_bicycling.cfm

Note: A trip is an approach or departure from the school, so a bus or parent car makes two trips (in/out) in the morning, while staff make one trip (in) in the morning.

a plaza would interrupt the view of the historic façade, while interrupting the sledding hill and open space. Finally, in addition to the proposed cost sharing with Arlington County state we may be able to secure federal funds may be available for these safety improvements

Finally, you should know that the BLPC carefully considered a number of locations for the access driveway. Extending 22nd St North (a County right of way) or 23rd St North (the current service entrance) presents much more difficult grading, tree canopy and open space interruptions. A “low road” on the south side of the soccer field had similar challenges. Allowing both entry and departure from Old Dominion was discouraged by VDOT and would likely require widening Old Dominion, more extensive grading and tree canopy impact, and complete redesign of Stratford Park amenities.

The full driveway from Vacation to Old Dominion is the best compromise on costs and site use, without compromising student safety. Without it we will miss the mark on pedestrian safety, fire/emergency access and handicapped accessibility. We strongly recommend you endorse the driveway access element of the concept design and project cost.

3. Phasing Options. There are two scenarios that we have been asked to work through (1000 and 1300 seats), yet we understand you are investigating a smaller “as is” scenario as well. We want to address some challenges you will likely run into, and address some misconceptions about phasing from our study of this site.

More Seats - The Stratford 1300 Seat Scenario

Recent community conversations have erroneously suggested that 1300 is not possible on this site due to historic preservation. While all of the site conditions contribute challenges, 1300 would be possible if built in one phase. In August you directed us not to pursue this option due to cost constraints and the expected availability of lower cost seats elsewhere. A 1300 seat student school would cost an additional \$36M³ if completed in a single phase; it would include both structured parking (like the Jefferson site and Wilson site, and likely most future school sites in Arlington) and a new full size gymnasium. If this site needs to hold 1300 students in the future, designing it all at once is much more cost-efficient and preserves more open space. As we have indicated previously, the BLPC strongly recommends you choose the final seat capacity for this school now and build once.

Fewer seats - The Stratford “As Is” Scenario. The 850 student option discussed in your October work session was not a fleshed out “as is” option. First, it includes an unspecified number of trailers as “permanent seats”. Second, it requires capital funds to restore the Stratford program area to middle school space, with a placeholder of \$5M. Third, at your direction it has not been studied or discussed with the BLPC. When we started this process you directed staff and BLPC to a 1000 seat with 1300 as a possible second phase. We understand staff will be providing a “quick study” of the options for 850 students, per your new request on November 5.

If you wade into reconsidering the plan for seats at Stratford, please keep in mind:

A) Neither the BLPC nor the public have seen a realistic scenario that places 850 permanent seats on the site for \$5M. We caution you that staff doing a “quick study” may lead to the many of the same cost and feasibility constraints we have had here once we you have time for actual review. If such an option were pursued it seems we would face some or all of the following challenges, none of which have been either studied in depth or supported by your BLPC:

- Set a precedent that we would use permanent trailers to meet long-term capacity needs
- Permanently cover park land and open space with one-story trailers
- Permanently threaten the historic façade and view shed the West option preserves

³ August 11, 2015 Board Worksession – Stratford presentation, p. 89.

- Fail to meet Arlington ed specs for common spaces, especially recreation and media center. Currently the building has only room for two classes to have gym class at the same time; more recreation space is needed to meet instructional needs.
- Require significant instructional compromises, for instance shifting from 5/7 to 6/7 utilization model for class space, despite initial instructional leader input that this would adversely impact the middle school curriculum. Thus, construction would drive instruction.
- Fail to mitigate existing pedestrian safety, fire safety and universal design/accessibility deficiencies currently posed by the existing structure
- Require any future renovation to be done on an occupied site with even higher concentration of students and much higher future cost
- This site would be the smallest middle school population and would constantly be considered for adding additional relocatables despite the difficult site conditions and small common spaces.

B) **“As is” without renovation** *would not add seats to this site*, would not meet education specifications and would not allow an instructional environment comparable to other Arlington middle schools. The gymnasium would only accommodate 2 classes of physical education at a time, about half what is needed. Existing pedestrian safety, fire safety and universal design/accessibility challenges would remain.

C) **As is” plus renovation** of Stratford space to meet Arlington Ed specs--including basic recreation needs for a middle school--would *reduce the number of seats by 100-150 to ~650 seats*, cost several million dollars, and fail to mitigate existing pedestrian/fire/handicapped access challenges.

BPLC Concept Design Recommendation:

Our students and community need your leadership to make sure these much-needed seats are in use by 2019, at the very latest. You appointed an unusually large BLPC to carefully study and advise you on these issues and, as you’ve noted, we have done our job. We have painstakingly and thoughtfully approached, vetted and compromised on every piece of this puzzle that we can. We have made incredibly tough decisions, challenged each other, staff and designers, and come to the best recommendation we can. Making decisions that impact hundreds of thousands of Arlington residents for decades is an important responsibility, and one we have not taken lightly

Now it is your turn. Please do not delay further. Accept our concept design, knowing this is the very best for Arlington County with the scope of 1000 seats at a historically relevant, topographically vexing site with major transportation challenges. Please vote to move forward with our concept design on November 16th, so we can begin schematic design and get Stratford Middle School open in 2019.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve our Arlington community and support you. We look forward to beginning schematic design after your November 16th vote, and working with you and the broader community to make this the most cost-efficient, safe, instructionally-excellent and history-celebrating middle school it can be.

Sincerely,



Susan R. Cunningham
Chair, Building Level Planning Committee, Stratford Middle School Project