

November 3, 2015

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

Dear School Board Members:

The Stratford Middle School Building Level Planning Committee (BLPC) is pleased to share our recommendation for the concept design of this new neighborhood middle school. We recommend “West with High Road” to be further developed in the schematic design phase.

Overview

We have held 14 meetings since April, working closely with APS staff, County staff, design professionals, traffic engineers and community members to identify the best building massing and site access for an addition to support a 1000-student neighborhood middle school by 2019. Our committee includes 5 APS educators, 7 PTA leaders, 8 civic association representatives, 3 historic preservation experts and a Facility Advisory Committee (FAC) member. Together we have carefully studied the many challenges of this site, including three prior building additions, historically protected facades and viewsheds, pedestrian safety challenges, vehicular access by only small yield-to streets, steep topography, stream and tree protection areas, abutting residential properties and existing community recreation amenities. We considered at least 12 building massing options and 9 site access options, with community input at each meeting and extensive discussions with the Arlington Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB) and Public Facilities Review Committee (PFRC) and county staff liaisons throughout the process.

Our recommendations are summarized below and detailed on the following pages:

1. **Phasing** – We recommend building once on this complex site, ensuring common spaces are adequate to support maximum student population and maximizing open space for community use.
2. **Building site and massing** – We recommend the “West” option, building on top of the existing Stratford Program parking and drop off.
3. **Access and safety** – We recommend the “High Road” and other pedestrian safety improvements.
4. **Project Cost** – We recommend an estimated total project cost of \$36.3M rather than the bare bones \$31.26 M base option.
5. **History** – We recommend that you develop and set aside a dedicated fund for interpretation of the historic events, in addition to the \$36.3M project cost described above.

Recommendations

1. Phasing

As we discussed at your August and October work sessions, the BLPC unanimously recommends you **build once at this site**, expanding the building and ensuring common spaces are adequate for the number of students you plan to serve here for decades to come. All options we considered make it much harder and more costly to maximize use of the site in the future, so we recommend a master plan for the combined school/park parcel.

This is not an easy site and never has been. When selected for the first new Arlington County junior high school in 1950, it was called “Arlington’s most ambitious school building project.” At that time, “the challenges presented by the site [including highly varied topography, steep slopes, heavily wooded, a creek that ran across the property, surrounded by residential development on three sides] were recognized and discussed by the School Board, but ultimately it was felt that these potential difficulties were offset by the convenient and desirable location. The design and construction expenses incurred in accommodating the site were significant, with the grading contract alone amounting to \$49,600, or approximately 3 percent, of the actual construction cost of \$1,496,604. This caused considerable controversy among Arlington County tax payers who felt that the expense could have been avoided by the selection of a more regular site.”¹

Sixty-five years later, several temporary learning cottages have been in place, in front of the historic south façade, since 1972. The north, south, east and west facades have all accommodated additions, in 1995 and 2004. Neither building on top of the existing 3-story building nor tearing down the historic building is cost-efficient or recommended. Thus, we urge you to make the 2019 addition as large as you think it will need to be for the long run. Serving a larger student population (whether in temporary or permanent structures) would require additional gymnasium, cafeteria, media center, classroom space, and parking. These are costly additions, but will be considerably more costly and less space efficient if added in a fifth addition later.

2. Building Site and Massing

We recommend the “West” concept design as the best compromise option to meet instructional needs and open the neighborhood middle school by 2019, while respecting the important cultural history and current budget constraints. While the 45,000 sf Link with Atrium design was preferred by APS staff and some BLPC members, the Arlington HALRB and State Historic Preservation Office shared strong objections and suggested the site could lose National Historic Register designation if Link were built. In addition to the likely delays and costs this could introduce, the initial design of the smaller Link is not favored by the BLPC. Some key elements we discussed in our discussions include:

- **More seats.** The West design adds classroom space and an auxiliary gym to accommodate 1000 students without relocatable classrooms.

¹ <http://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/06/HALRB.Stratford-Local-Historic-District-Designation-Report.6.11.2015.pdf>, accessed 10/24/15.

- **Accessibility.** Though the best compromise to balance the many constraints, the West option makes the student travel distances slightly longer than preferred. In addition, the 2004 music wing addition is connected to the main building on only one level, while the elevator is at the opposite end of the building. With additional project funding, we would look closely at this condition and likely add additional handicapped access at that end of the building to reduce travel distances for those with limited mobility.
- **Building entrance.** The main pedestrian and vehicle entrance for the building moves into the West addition, closer to the gymnasium and cafeteria. Bus drop off remains on Vacation Lane, with the historic bus loop expanded to reduce on-street queuing of buses.
- **Common spaces.** In the base case, the existing library, gymnasium, cafeteria, auditorium and most classrooms are reused with minimal renovation. The loading dock remains in its current location. FAC has expressed concern about adequacy of common spaces for future needs. Community members have expressed concerns about the small gymnasium with limited (250) seating and the small media center. Expanding the current gym is high cost and would require substantial modifications to the historic south façade. Additional project funding would enable us to explore making common areas more adequate for 1000 students and community needs.
- **Open space.** In order to preserve the historic south façade of the building, the new addition is placed on the current lower paved area of Stratford Park. This parking is replaced with a more efficient surface parking lot on the school property, and this option maintains more green space overall than many of the options studied. The sledding hill and all park amenities are preserved. With additional funding or partnership with the County, some or all parking could be covered or placed under the field to further expand open space and field space. Maintenance staff strongly recommends a turf field for this site, but this has not been included in the base project cost.
- **Historic.** North and south facades are both preserved, as is the view from Old Dominion (the path students walked in 1959) and the two doors believed to have been used during the first week of racial integration (gym stair door and central stair door). Preliminary opportunities for interpretive signage and public access have been identified.
- **Environmental quality.** Part of the site remains heavily wooded, and part of the site borders a stream (the headwaters of Windy Run) with a riparian protection area that is mostly paved today. A tree survey has been conducted, and all siting options were evaluated for tree impact. A few trees will be impacted, especially by the expanded surface parking lot along Vacation Lane, and will be replaced on site. Most of the building and landscape predates modern storm water controls, so all disturbed areas and new hardscape will be brought up to code and will improve the environmental quality for the site. Green roofs have been considered and would improve water quality and energy efficiency further but are not in the base project cost.

3. Access & Safety

The BLPC recommends critical access and circulation improvements to improve pedestrian safety, including a new on-site driveway connecting Vacation Lane to Old Dominion along the south façade.

Converting from the current building use to the 1000-seat Stratford Middle School will likely increase parent trips 300%, pedestrian traffic 700% and bike traffic 300%, while moving the morning arrival time from usually-daylight 9 a.m. today to 7:50 a.m. Combining all modes on Vacation Lane (a yield-to street, with sharp turns, steep hill and poor visibility) is not acceptable to the BLPC. In addition to the obvious safety concerns, we are concerned that parents will be more likely to drive students if pedestrian safety is not adequate, further increasing the loads and reducing pedestrian safety. Recommended safety improvements include:

- **Separate cars, buses and pedestrians on Vacation Lane and improve fire/emergency vehicle access**, by including:
 - driveway from Vacation Lane to Old Dominion, along south building façade, and
 - bus loop reconfiguration and limited time access signage on Vacation Lane and 23rd /Randolph St.
- **Enhance pedestrian infrastructure, through:**
 - pedestrian-activated traffic light at Old Dominion,
 - school zone speed limit flashers and crosswalks on Old Dominion, Military, Lorcom, Vacation Lane and 23rd St, and
 - all-way stops and crosswalks at school driveway entrances and Vacation/23rd St, and
 - crossing guards at major crossings (Old Dominion, Military, possibly Lorcom), in partnership with Arlington County Police Department

Further, we recommend **implementing low-cost pedestrian improvements immediately** (signage, temporary speed control, enforcement, transit demand management incentives) to benefit students and staff currently attending the school.

4. Project Cost

During the site selection process in 2014, staff estimated costs for a 1000-seat school on this site to be \$29.2M to \$56.5M. The School Board selected the low end of that range as the project goal in the CIP. Since that time there has been unusually high escalation of construction costs, both locally and nationally. In addition, the site complexities highlighted in the phasing discussion above make this an unusually difficult and expensive site to modify. As a result, the initial cost estimates for the proposed 45,000 sf addition to serve 1000 students ranged from \$43M to \$47M.

At your request, staff presented potential 10,000 square foot and programmatic reductions at your October 6 work session. These options were developed without BLPC involvement and, in our view, they represent very significant compromises. We do not fully support such drastic scope reductions this early in the project. As you directed, we have identified the West option with high road as the most feasible of these options, with a bare bones base project of a 35,000 sf addition with an estimated total project cost of \$31.26M. However, we strongly recommend you approve **an estimated total project cost of at least \$36.3 M**, to ensure instructional, safety, historic, recreational, community and environmental

needs are balanced effectively during the schematic design. In addition, we ask that **you fund historic signage and interpretation elements separately**, to avoid the risk of value engineering during the project limiting our community's important investment in telling the story of the 1959 racial integration.

We will work through detailed options and compromises during schematic design, bring line item costs for the priority items and any opportunities for additional cost savings in the schematic design presentation, currently planned for February 2016. From our initial discussions, the priority elements added back will likely include some of the following items:

- **Adequate common areas, for student and community use** (for instance, moving media center from 3rd floor to the new addition and public entrance, making media center closer to standard middle school size, expanding gymnasium/recreation space to standard middle school size, reconfiguring cafeteria, maintaining flexible/drama classroom)
- **Improved accessibility for handicapped and for community users** (for instance, adding east elevator, improving handicapped parking access, integrating school and park)
- **Enhanced environmental sustainability** (for instance, reducing or covering hardscape where possible, making all hardscapes permeable, protecting and expanding tree canopy and enhancing outdoor learning opportunities)

We believe many of these elements are necessary to ensure that the new Stratford can well serve generations of students, and the broader community, for generations. These elements will ensure an experience comparable to that of peers attending other neighborhood middle schools in Arlington.

5. Honoring Our History

The BLPC unanimously recommends that the School Board **work with County Board and community members to celebrate the historic events of February 2, 1959**, when Stratford Junior High was the first public school in Virginia to be racially integrated.

Following the May 17, 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling that a separate but equal school system was unconstitutional, "Virginia Commonwealth officials had little intention of implementing any desegregation program pursuant to the Brown ruling...Governor Thomas B. Stanley stated that he 'would use every means at my command to continue segregated schools in Virginia.' In 1956, the Virginia General Assembly passed a referendum giving local school boards the authority to manage student placement, while reserving the right to close any Commonwealth school where integration occurred – establishing Virginia's policy of 'massive resistance' to school integration.

Arlington then approved a gradual and limited desegregation plan that would permit integration at only a few elementary and junior high schools and one senior high school over the course of three academic years, from 1956 to 1958. ... In response, the Virginia General Assembly voted in 1956 to strip the county of its right to an elected school board and replaced it with a more conservative county-appointed board. The first tentative steps towards an integrated Arlington school system were abruptly ended."

*Arlington citizens, with support from the NAACP and other national leaders, continued to work toward fulfilling the Supreme Court's ruling. Stratford played a critical role in two tense, but peaceful moments, when integration was attempted, first unsuccessfully by three students (Edward Leslie Hamm, Jr., Joyce Marie Bailey, and George Tyrone Nelson) on September 5, 1957, and then successfully 15 months later when: "On Monday morning, February 2, 1959, under the protection of approximately eighty-five Arlington police officers, Ronald Deskins, Michael Jones, Lance Newman, and Gloria Thompson entered and were admitted to Stratford Junior High School without incident, making Stratford the first public school in the Commonwealth of Virginia to desegregate ."*²

BLPC members have been honored to have the opportunity to learn more about the important historical events at Stratford Junior High School. For many this was a first opportunity to delve into the local and international news clippings and newsreels from the peaceful racial integration, let alone hear directly from those who attended Stratford at the time. We look forward to supporting School Board, County Board and the broader community in honoring this history for both school students and the broader public, both as part of the Stratford Middle School building and in curricular and community events.

We recommend separate funding and program commitment to honor these events now and in perpetuity, through on-site art, photo panels, signage and ongoing community events and curricular connections. In addition, we recommend appointing 1-2 BLPC members from the broader community to help guide this investment. Since the site is already designated on the National Historical Register and the Virginia State Register, the BLPC has had full participation by two representatives from the HALRB and a staff member from CPHD. In addition, the State Historic Preservation Officer has reviewed preliminary designs and shared feedback. HALRB and county staff are currently reviewing a request to designate the school property as a local historic preservation district. If the school is designated as a local historic district, HALRB must issue a Certificate of Appropriateness before a use permit can be issued by the County for any renovation to the property.

Closing

We appreciate the many tough decisions you have to make about meeting our student capacity needs. We ask for your concurrence with the West Option, High Road and \$36.3M estimated project cost. During the Stratford Middle School schematic design phase, we will continue to work hard to balance community needs and capital budget on this do-once, do-it-right site, while continuing our collaboration with others in our community to complete the renovation for a fall 2019 opening.

Sincerely,



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

² [HALRB.Stratford-Local-Historic-District-Designation-Report.6.11.2015.pdf](#),