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URBAN FACILITY PLANNING: BROAD-BASED INVOLVEMENT

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The magnitude and nature of issues confronting urban school districts require broad-based involvement in the decision-making process. This involvement should include persons who will be directly and indirectly impacted by decisions made. This includes individuals and organizations within a school system and those who are in the community at-large. Therefore, broad-based involvement in a planning process is essential in order for a diverse set of perspectives to be heard. This type of involvement, if handled properly, will ensure that intelligent, sound and impartial decisions are made.

The opportunity for broad-based involvement maintains the integrity of a planning process and allows for varying perspectives to be considered. It usually yields new insights into an approach, and often, factors arise that may not

have been considered. Since school districts are beginning to use this approach more frequently, this has become a powerful way to build consensus as school districts throughout America seek to upgrade, modernize and/or expand their facility inventory.

Below is an overview of two different urban school districts that sought decisions through a broad-based involvement process. For privacy reasons, the districts will be referred to as School District 1 and School District 2. These examples are not intended to bias impression of the school districts, which reinforced the need for anonymity. These examples are used for purposes of demonstrating different levels of participation in the planning processes.

Both are urban districts with population of more than 200,000 with low SES, large minority populations and low test scores. Both of the districts were experiencing high turn over of leadership.

School District 1

The district's facility planning process involved collecting extensive data and had a citywide planning committee. There were public hearings on various proposals with usually fewer than 30 persons in attendance. There was little to no grassroots involvement. There was generally distrust and often no agreement on overall direction. There was very little overall vision or direction. Most of the decisions were being made from the top down. Business models were employed to crunch numbers and justify proposals. Even though many persons were very well intentioned, the results were a high degree of frustration, very little buy-in and very little follow through. The excuses for not gaining greater involvement were: apathy, not enough time and high cost.

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School District 2

The planning process for School District 2 involved forming overall district level committees. Breaking the city into sub-geographic planning areas (approximately eight to 10 schools in each area) determined by census tracts, highways and rivers, etc. Planning area advisory committees were formed and included a wide array of community and educational representatives. Through extensive participation, a citywide vision was established, and each area developed options on how this vision could best be accomplished. There were several opportunities, especially at the area level, to provide input into the planning and decision-making processes. Consensus-building community dialogues (with 300 to 500 persons in each dialogue) were held. Websites were used to gather feedback through an online questionnaire. Information was compiled and shared freely, and ongoing communication structures were implemented. Extensive strides were taken to involve the community. The result was a new hope, a new vision, a new consensus, a collective direction and a much higher support base.

Did it involve everyone? Absolutely not. Did everyone have the opportunity? Yes. This is much more than sending out a flyer saying, “You all come.” It means going out and shaking the bushes, getting people involved, listening to them and treating them with respect. Does it take longer? Yes and no. The process in District 1 was initially shorter but, in the long run, longer. It should also be understood that there is a difference between “long-range planning” and “planning for a long time.” It is not advisable to short cut the community involvement process, but it is not wise to use an involvement process that goes on forever.

In both cases, many of the other issues associated with urban schools continued to plague the districts: turnover of board members, politics, funding crises, No Child Left Behind, charter schools, etc. In both cases, there are pressures not to follow through and start over — again. However greater involvement can ensure continuity. The continued involvement of a broad-based group of



participants in the decision-making process is vitally important during the implementation of an educational facility plan. Involvement can be established at different levels and in different forms. The primary goal is to keep the school community and community-at-large informed of implementation activities and allow for input and feedback as the plan develops. Three levels of committees can be formed to facilitate continued involvement: District, Community/Parent and Oversight. A description of these committees is as follows.

District Committee

A committee consisting of a cross-section of administrators, teachers and staff should be formed and convened on a consistent basis. The purpose of the meetings is to create a forum for gathering input from the educational community and keeping them informed on the status of implementation activities.

Community/ Parent Committee

Parents, as well as the community as a whole, can be a school district's greatest advocate or worst critic. True involvement and sharing of information can eliminate criticism. Involving Parent Teacher Associations and other parent and community organizations is an excellent way of keeping parents and guardians active in and informed about implementation activities. In urban districts, less than 25 percent of the voters have children in schools. The nonparent needs to be an active player as well.

Oversight Committee

Accountability and trust are major issues confronting urban school districts. Far too often, promises made by urban districts have been broken because of lack of finances and political pressures. The general public, particularly local newspapers, has used

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this as a reason to criticize urban district officials. Some of these critics have raised the question of trust and follow-through on previous commitments. Forming an oversight committee can help dispel the myths or realities associated with past experiences and establish an accountability structure.

The committee should consist of a wide range of community representatives and should include persons with skills and training in construction, finance and law, among other areas. The committee should operate independently of existing political and educational structures. This composition will also ensure long-term continuity and credibility of the overall effort.

Addressing the conditions of urban school facilities is of great urgency. We, as facility planners, are committed to working with urban school districts to develop and implement a systematic approach for modernizing aging urban school facilities. The next generation of school children is far too important and valuable to be forced into learning environments that are neither conducive nor appropriate for teaching. Urban children of the 21st Century should have schools that meet current educational needs, yet flexible enough to accommodate program changes of the future.

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