

School Sprawl

by Edward T. McMahon

The story is a familiar one: a wealthy business owner offers a cash-strapped state university a free piece of land in a suburban business park, as the site for a new satellite campus. Of course the state will still have to pay for road improvements, sewer and water extensions, and the classroom building itself, but boosters say the school will help attract companies to the business park. It sounds like a

great deal. So what does the state do? It turns the offer down and decides to move the university center into a complex of three empty city-owned buildings in the heart of a faded downtown.

“Why build new when we could, for less money, create a quality educational center in the heart of our community?” asked Hagerstown, Maryland Mayor Robert Bruchey. Why indeed.

Instead of a large single-purpose classroom building in a suburban office

park, the state’s decision means that in just a few years over 1,500 students will be attending classes in downtown Hagerstown, Maryland. This surprising decision is just the latest manifestation of Maryland’s three year old Smart Growth Initiative and it illustrates how the actions of federal, state or local government can either contribute to or help to prevent the kind of suburban sprawl that is so common throughout America.

Federal, state, and local governments



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



Online Comments:

“As a ‘high mileage mom,’ I can attest to the problems of driving kids around the suburbs. ... Massachusetts’ school building assistance guidelines encourage sprawl in a number of ways. The establishment of arbitrary and oversized parcels for schools force schools to the edges where larger parcels still exist. The guidelines also do not allow town libraries located close to a school to be used as partial or full ‘credit’ for a school library ... ditto for recreational facilities. Investing multiple millions of dollars for a facility that closes at 3 p.m. completely ignores other community needs – pre-school indoor play in winter weather, evening athletic uses, being

able to use classrooms for other community meetings and organizations.”

– Sharon Wason, Sewer & Water Commissioner [and former Planning Board Member], Walpole, Massachusetts

“Many people do not realize how strong a growth magnet schools can be. In Monroe County, Indiana, the school corporation built a new elementary school on the west side of Bloomington in a sparsely developed location. Not long after the groundbreaking, residential subdivision plats were being submitted to develop the surrounding land: an unfortunate situation considering the lack of infrastructure in the area.”

– Bryan Stumpf, Planner, HNTB Corporation, Indianapolis, Indiana [Stumpf also serves on the PCJ’s Editorial Advisory Board]

The University of Washington has helped revitalize downtown Tacoma by rehabbing buildings for academic use.

construct new facilities all the time. The location and design of these facilities can either help make local smart growth strategies work or they can make the problem worse. In announcing the state’s decision, Maryland Governor Paris Glendening said that “the downtown site meets our smart growth goals, since we are investing in the Hagerstown economy and revitalizing the city, saving taxpayers millions of dollars in unnecessary roads and other infrastructure costs, and preserving our open space and natural resources.”

Travel across the country to Tacoma, Washington and you'll hear the same story. The University of Washington rejected a greenfield site for its new South Puget Sound campus and, instead, decided to restore six historic warehouses in a dilapidated district on the edge of downtown Tacoma. Today, the area is a thriving museum and university district. Retail and restaurants have returned and downtown is undergoing a renaissance. Hagerstown and Tacoma are two "win-win" examples of how smart growth ought to work, but these examples are the exception rather than the rule, especially when it comes to school construction.

The South Carolina Coastal Conservation League recently released a study examining how poor school site selection affects children, the community, and the environment. The study shows that new schools take up more land and are farther from neighborhoods, making it increasingly difficult for children to walk to school. Schools built since 1983 have much lower rates of children walking and higher rates of "hazard busing."¹

Construction of large schools on the outskirts of communities not only gobbles up land, it is rarely cost effective. The cost of new school construction is frequently higher than rehabilitation or building additions onto existing schools.

Costs also increase because children must be bused to most new schools. In Maine, the number of children attending public schools declined by 27,000 between 1970-1995 but state and local busing costs rose from \$8.7 million to \$54 million a year during that period. The principal reason: sprawling land use patterns.

School sprawl doesn't affect just the kids, it also affects their parents. A 1999 report – "High Mileage Moms" – by the Surface Transportation Policy Project reports that mothers with school aged

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¹ The study, titled "Wait for the Bus: How School Site Selection and Design Deter Walking to School and Contribute to Sprawl," is available from the S.C. Coastal Conservation League for \$15.00 (the Executive Summary is available free). Call: 843-723-8035.



Big v. Small

The trend toward school consolidation, and big schools, continues. High school enrollments of 2,000 or more are not uncommon. Today the argument in favor of big schools and school consolidation is often framed in two ways: (1) bigger schools are more economical to operate; and (2) bigger schools offer a greater variety of course opportunities.

A steadily growing body of academic research, however, has found that in most cases smaller schools, not bigger schools, yield better student performance. As Kathleen Cotton, an educational research specialist at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon, notes, "decades of research show that student achievement in small schools is at least equal and often superior to achievement in large schools ... moreover, although it is often assumed that large schools are cheaper to operate and provide richer curricula than small schools, studies show that neither of these things is necessarily true. ... In addition, a large body of research in the affective and social realms overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools." Cotton, "Affective and Social Benefits of Small-Scale Schooling," (EDO-RC-96-5; December 1996) (available at: <www.ael.org/eric/digests/edorc965.htm>).

Among Cotton and others' research findings: students in small schools experience a much greater sense of belonging; student attendance rates are higher; students participate in extracurricular activities at significantly higher rates; and attitudes of students and teachers toward work are better.

Why is this the case? As Cotton explains: "People in small schools come to know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools, and rates of parent involvement are higher. Small-school students tend to take more of the responsibility for their own learning, learning activities are more likely to be individualized, classes are typically smaller, and scheduling is much more flexible. ... Finally, small schools tend to exhibit greater emphasis on learning that is experiential and relevant to the world outside of school."

With the growing use of the Internet and interactive video-conferencing (allow-

ing, for example, teachers in specialized disciplines to teach to students in more than one school simultaneously) it is also more difficult to argue that only bigger schools can offer a wide array of course offerings.

More information on school-size research is available at the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education & Small Schools, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's National Library of Education: <www.ael.org/eric/small.htm>



School Standards:

School construction guidelines promulgated by the Council of Educational Facility Planners, a national organization which many states look to in setting their own school construction standards, recommends the following:

- for elementary schools: 10 acres of land plus one acre for every 100 students.
- for middle schools: 20 acres of land plus one acre for every 100 students.
- for high schools: 30 acres of land plus one acre for every 100 students.

According to Constance Beaumont of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Council's guidelines, "put pressure on small towns and cities alike to abandon still-serviceable historic school buildings for new 'school sprawl' in outlying areas."

Just as school siting, design, and construction standards tend to promote the use of large undeveloped tracts of land at the expense of walkable locations in town and city centers, so too do a slew of other state and federal public facility standards. Many communities, for example, have had new government facilities locate outside of downtown areas because federal or state facility standards require so much space or parking that the only feasible locations are in outlying areas. Unfortunately, neither the added cost to users (and employees) in having to drive extra miles, nor the added infrastructure costs for new sewer and utility lines, is usually factored into the equation.

For more information on this topic, see Constance Beaumont's excellent book, Smart States, Better Communities, available from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 202-588-6296. Beaumont also authored "Coping with Superstores," in PCJ # 17, Winter 1995.

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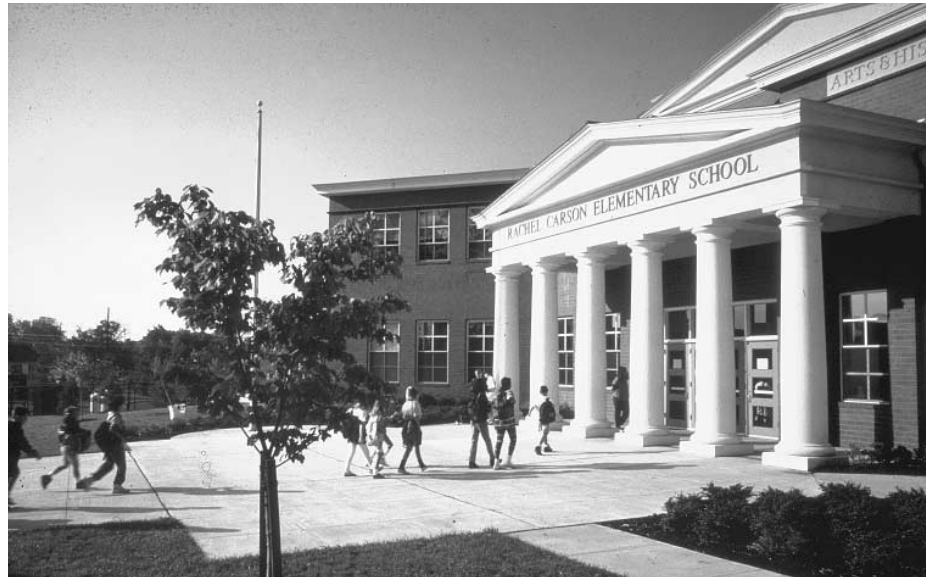
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children make an average of more than five car trips a day, 20 percent more than other women. The report says that far flung growth traps mothers behind the wheel of a car – an average of 66 minutes a day spent chauffeuring children to school, soccer games, birthday parties, or grocery stores.

It is bad enough that so few children can walk or ride a bicycle to school, but an even more powerful argument for curbing school sprawl is student achievement. The *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* recently reported on a national study which concluded that “the gap in academic achievement between rich schools and poor schools is greatly reduced when schools are smaller.” *“Big v. Small”, p. 17*

This is powerful information with important implications, because all over the country smaller, old schools are being closed in favor of bigger, new schools in far flung locations. In Georgia, for example, more than 100 smaller, historic school buildings have been closed since 1986.

So why are new schools being built in outlying, greenfield locations? One key reason is that many states follow national guidelines affecting the design and location of new schools as well as the rehabilitation of older school buildings. Through parking, acreage, funding, and



Locating new schools in the center of the community can be done, as in Kentlands, Maryland.

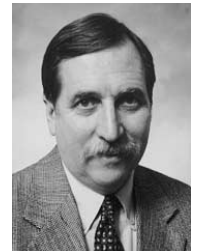
other requirements, these guidelines often have the effect of mandating “school sprawl” and undermining efforts to preserve historic schools in walkable neighborhoods. *School Standards, p. 17*

What can be done? Change the rules to level the playing field. In 1995, Maryland spent only 34 percent of its school construction budget on existing schools. This was because its funding formulas favored new schools. As a result of the state’s “Smart Growth Initiative,” the funding formulas were changed. In 1998, 84 percent of Maryland’s school construction funding was being used for improvements to existing facilities.

Pennsylvania, Maine, and Vermont have changed their policies to make it easier to preserve historic schools, and other states are likely to follow. And in 1999, California approved the “Safe Routes to School” bill dedicating up to \$20 million a year to improving biking and walking routes to school.

Neighborhood schools are worth preserving. They are usually buildings of distinction that link residents to their roots in the past and provide a critical focal point for communities. Sure, we will always need new schools, but there is also value in reinvesting in older schools and existing neighborhoods. Planners, and planning commissions, are uniquely positioned to inform state and local educators about the values of smart growth – and see that planning for schools supports the community’s other efforts to shape growth and development. ♦

Edward McMahon is a land use planner, attorney, and director of The Conservation Fund’s “American Greenways Program.” He is former president of Scenic America, a national non-profit organization devoted to protecting America’s scenic landscapes. McMahon’s column appears regularly in the Planning Commissioners Journal.



The fleet of school buses ready to transport students back to their homes miles away is a familiar scene at schools across the country. Who’s paying for this?