

**COMMUNITY LISTENING SESSIONS – FOCUSED CONVERSATION ABOUT
HELENA PUBIC SCHOOLS FACILITIES
AND THE EDUCATIONAL GOALS THEY SUPPORT**

November 11, 2015

Session Summary

CONVERSATION OBJECTIVES

- Re-engage community members in thinking about the District's facilities and the educational goals they support.
- Establish a productive conversation climate regardless of points of view.
- Provide the community with some context for discussion.
- Collect information from community members that will help inform the School District in moving forward in facility planning.
- Explain what happens to tonight's input and encourage community interest and engagement as the process goes forward.

COMPLETED AGENDA ITEMS

Introduction to the Session:

Welcome from the Superintendent

Superintendent Kent Kultgen welcomed the 32 people at the session and explained that he would like to re-start the conversation with the community about facilities and how they support educational goals. He referred the group to information attached to the agenda that provided demographic data and a map showing the location of Helena Public Schools. Superintendent Kultgen explained that he and the Board of Trustees are hoping for an open, collaborative process with the community and that only 3 steps have been defined at this point as follows:

- Recent conversation with City and County elected officials;
- Six community and 2 staff facilitated listening sessions (taking place this week and the 2nd week of December);
- A statistically valid survey in January 2016 to affirm what was heard in the listening sessions and help determine next steps.

The Superintendent thanked people for coming and turned the meeting over to the facilitator.

Role of the Facilitator, etc.

The facilitator explained her role as process manager for the listening sessions and stated the objectives for the evening. She asked those in attendance to honor the following conversation ground rules to encourage productive and civil conversation in the meeting:

- Be open and candid – but without a “blunt instrument”.
- Respect that others have different points of view; to learn – keep an open mind.
- Manage your own communication – contribute to the productivity of the conversation.
- Recognize realities – individually and collectively.

She also pointed out the presence of Board members in the group and asked if they might be participants as long as they followed the ground rules. The group was comfortable with Board member participation.

“Important Questions”

The facilitator explained that she was using a discussion tool called “Important Questions” to focus the conversation and that all participant responses would be recorded. The questions and participant responses are as follows.

“Warm up” – Why did you come to the meeting?

- I voted against the first bond – never voted against one before. Now I need to participate in what happens next.
- I want to hear other perspectives – I’m from the valley.
- I want to get information so I can be an informed voter.
- I’m excited about shaping it but also feel a sense of urgency and want to be part of a process where the majority will support what happens.
- I recognize that one size doesn’t fit all.
- I want to make sure all the competing interests have a voice in the process – that some are not taken off the table because of others’ self-interests.
- I want to advocate for my child and for kids who need access to schools.
- I want to get back to it – continue to work on it.
- I want to make sure Montessori continues.

What guiding principles are important to you as we talk about facilities and educational goals?

We believe:

- That students deserve appropriate and relevant curriculum/education to prepare them for success/graduation for different paths (i.e., college, career, etc.).
- In secure, safe, healthy, engaging facilities to support curriculum, teaching and learning.
- That safety and security problems of schools need to be prioritized including deferred maintenance and that those priorities should be addressed in steps that are transparent.
- That students and school staff deserve hygienic eating areas.
- That all schools should have adequate and sufficient resources.
- That facilities should support teachers and students with technology that works.
- That there are important needs for middle and high schools as well as elementary. We also believe that there should be opportunities for expansion (i.e., pre-K).
- In the integration of school in the community.
- That a good education system supports a strong community and its economy.
- That locations in the District have different needs.
- That people choose to live in locations and that neighborhood schools support those choices and lifestyles.
- We support city schools because they are the core of the city – pro city, not anti-valley.
- In bringing the community together.
- That it’s important to clearly define and agree on problems related to facilities and to articulate them on a factual basis.
- That we need to recognize that we have less money than needs and therefore, need to get “the best bang for the buck”.
- That tools other than a bond should be explored for facilities improvement (i.e., District boundary adjustments) and in assessing all available resources.
- That consensus requires balance between community value and individual priorities.

What “interests” need to be recognized as the District plans for facilities improvement?

- It's in our overall interest to:
 - Have a vibrant, high quality public education system for all students.
 - Aim for equal opportunity for all kids in the District.
 - Look at our District as one community.
 - Have schools with diversity.
 - Look at the great things we have and not dismantle them (great education, great neighborhood communities, small classrooms, etc.).
 - Eliminate the disparity in the District's schools.
 - Not to be locked in past structure and history and explore other ways of looking at facilities (i.e., fewer excellent schools rather than more that struggle; consolidations, additional small schools, etc.).
 - Have a 15 year plan with bond dollars covering pre-K-12 (a long term plan).
 - Realize that change is inevitable. We have to make changes and the status quo is not okay.
 - Accept that it will never be perfect - we do not have the dollars for perfect.
- It's in the District's interest to:
 - Look at current and future demographics to ensure that where schools are located makes sense.
 - Have a functioning school for everyone who lives in the community.
 - Make sure that all schools are inviting environments that parents feel good about when sending their children to those schools.
 - Have appropriately sited facilities for the number of kids in the building so they function accordingly (enough bathrooms, safety, etc.).
 - Have trigger points for closing or expanding consolidating schools.
 - Look at past election information and try to understand it.
 - Educate the community of voters (especially those with no children) about the needs of the District.
- It's in the interest of children with special needs to have adequate, supportive facilities.
- It's in the interest of gifted and talented students to have a good space to meet and work together. (The basement of Ray Bjork School works but a bathroom would be nice.
- It's in the interest of the District to recognize that there are competing interests and figure out how to balance funding so it feels fair.
- It's in the interest of those on fixed incomes to not have unmanageable tax burdens.
- It's in the interest of members of the public to have the District consider the impact of facility plans on neighborhood communities.
- It's in the interest of the community to have the District look at boundaries and redraw them as needed.
- It's in the interest of families to have affordable places to live and not have kids bussed any further than necessary.
- It's in the interest of students and teachers to concentrate on class sizes.
- It's in the interest of the community to have competing growth philosophies addressed.
- It's in the interest of the city to apply the urban growth policy to whatever decision are made and influence where growth will occur.
- It's in the interest of the community to know where the District gets its taxable valuation.
- It's in the interest of some to not plan any schools outside the urban planning boundary.
- It's in the community's interest to figure out how to get the valley to vote yes on a bond.
- It is in our interest to go to the Legislature to increase our spending capacity.

What do you not want to lose when planning for improved facilities?

- Community feel
- Walkability
- Individualized learning ability (i.e., PEAK; Gifted and Talented, etc.)
- People who know my kids to help them achieve academic success
- Strong public schools (strong public schools system basic to democracy)
- Schools to charter schools and private schools
- Good teachers to other districts
- Schools that are the heart of their neighborhoods
- Focus on our children's education starting in the early years and going to graduation

What do you want to gain when planning for facilities improvement?

- Facilities fixed
- Bond passage
- Plan where all kids can learn in excellent facilities in their neighborhoods
- Fairer representation of how kids get "assigned" to schools (so many kids bussed)
- Gain space in the valley schools so kids go to school closer to where they live
- Boundary adjustments
- Flexibility in utilization of space
- Better space for middle schoolers
- Assure access to appropriate programs
- Better integrated city-county planning - take advantage of modern education (4/3 model)
- Budget transparency in District budget and funding
- Technology
- Prepared students for our global economy
- Perspective/bond that acknowledges the culture of our Helena city/valley/east/west and we can come together to support schools and a bond
- Communication with the community and each other respectfully
- A community that is clear about the need and how money is spent so a bond can pass
- A plan that is clear and flexible so we all know what it is
- Clarity about what the problems are
- Energy efficiency
- More trust
- Blended models
- Small neighborhoods schools

How would you describe a useful process that engages the community?

Context for Tonight's Conversation

- Include the population that does not have kids in school in the conversation. Increase their understanding of the needs.
- Set priorities and present them to the community so priorities are understood.
- Present quantitative data.
- Engage public/private entities to identify collaborative efforts that will benefit facilities.
- Help the public understand best practices in education.
- Re-create school as a community center so it serves many interests in the community.
- Present bond language in a way that doesn't present zero sum choices