

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

November 9, 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 48 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 want to get a better understanding of what the School District really needs/wants.
- I believe that schools are central to the stability and integrity of a community and that includes location and size.
- We need to get back to/maintain cohesiveness in the community.
- I’m concerned that the earlier facilities discussion got ahead of education.
- We need to find an end to get this done.
- I care about the education of all the kids and the community.
- Twenty percent of kindergarten families request that their kids be in Montessori and we don’t currently have the capacity to meet those requests.
- The state of the facilities doesn’t accurately reflect how the community cares about education.
- I have passion for kids and educating them.
- We need to encourage the community to take responsibility for what’s happening at Central School.
- I want to be a part of the conversation that identifies the real issues that are in the way of passing a bond to improve facilities.
- I care about neighborhood schools and walkable communities.

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

We believe:

- That education is a hallmark of our community – now and in the future.
- That all schools and kids are important and that we can help one another.
- In providing educational opportunity for all levels of achievement and that our focus should be on the quality of education (teachers and parents).
- In helping all schools - Schools need to be equitably funded based on needs and be safe learning environments (we don’t want to create haves and have not’s in terms of schools).
- In exploring all models of providing education.
- That our efforts should be less about new facilities and more about how they are used. At the same time, we recognize that the physical standards of our facilities have significant deficiencies (safety, health, space).
- That facilities need to keep up with technology and provide for increased graduation requirements (i.e., math and science).
- That students, teachers and families deserve better facilities and safe learning environments so teaching and learning can occur to the best of everyone’s ability.
- That “one size does not fit all” and that families should be able to choose if kids attend small or large schools.
- That accessible and stable schools encourage hope rather than despair where poverty and homelessness are daily situations for students and families.

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

We believe:

- That we need to create public awareness about the urgency of the situation at Central School including:
 - Displacement that causes hardships
 - Challenging demographics, special needs and homelessness/poverty
- That urgent situations in the District need to be recognized and addressed soon – not eventually.
- In a holistic approach that balances community capacity with education needs and recognizes that it's important to live within our means. Priorities matter.
- That we need to spend facilities money wisely to meet those educational needs.
- That new and improved facilities should reflect modern, efficient, and sustainable standards and that some needs can be addressed short of new buildings.
- That a facilities plan should:
 - Regularly assess boundaries to reflect the current population across the District.
 - Address K-12.
 - Include a guide to decisions about school size and capacity.
- That schools are not just buildings but are valuable community spaces that represent and support:
 - Neighborhood character and stability
 - Open space and park areas
 - Safety (lower crime rates near elementary schools)
 - Walkability
- That there are differences between town/valley and city and we should take advantage of those differences rather than using them to divide or pit us against each other.
- We recognize that there are competing and conflicting interests that are part of the bigger picture we face.
- That we need to educate the public regarding the greater value of schools so that we build trust and support for a comprehensive, long-term plan – we're all in this together. that plan should articulate the interests and how they can benefit.
- That the County has a responsibility for funding, impact fees and a shared financial burden.
- That legislators have a responsibility to hear us and can demonstrate that they hear us it through policy.
- That we can learn from other District/states experiences.
- We recognize and value the hard work of the School Board. We recognize and value the hard work and interests and concerns of the community. We recognize that there is a necessary partnership between the Board/District and the community. We need a politically possible solution.

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

- It's in our overall interest to:
 - Have the best educated kids we possibly can.
 - Have strong public schools.
 - Have an educated populace.
 - Best utilize the resources we have.
 - Have what is best for students and teachers.
 - Have a vision and master plan beginning with High Schools.
 - Act short term but think long term.
 - Have a plan that is as inclusive as possible.
 - Have professional help in developing a vision and plan.
- It's in the interest of our children/students to:
 - Have an evolving education process and flexible learning spaces that are dynamic and adaptable over time.
 - Have access to top notch technology.
 - Have alternative learning environments that meet individual needs (i.e., PAL; Montessori; vocational; tactile, etc.).
- It's in the interest of teachers and school staff to have a good working environment.
- It's in the interest of the community and its neighborhoods including the valley to:
 - Define what is meant by “neighborhood” school – not just in the city.
 - Maintain neighborhood schools to support economic strength; strong neighborhoods; and an overall strong community.
 - Keep neighborhood schools because of the role they play in community building.
 - Have the best of both worlds – neighborhood schools and valley schools.
- It is in the interest of a thriving valley community to validate/have it validated that it is community wherever community is.
- It's in the interest of the Helena area community to have a vibrant city center.
- It's in the interest of the greater community not to pit the valley against the city.
- It's in the interest of public health and a livable community to:
 - Have environmentally safe, healthy, and secure school buildings.
 - Promote walkability to neighborhood schools in support of a healthy livable community.
 - Consider the environment and safety when planning and making decision about where to build new schools.
- It's in the interest of the community economy to have a good school system to attract people.
- It's in the interest of all property owners and property values to:
 - Have a thriving school system.
 - Have facilities repurposed to meet community interests.
- It's in the interest of local businesses to have a well-educated workforce.
- It's in the interest of Helena taxpayers to:
 - Not subsidize growth outside the city growth policy.
 - Have energy efficient facilities.

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

- It's in the interest of the District and the City to:
 - Look at the city growth policy and determine where growth has/is occurring in Helena and how it has changed related to the policy.
 - Be proactive instead of reactive
 - Look to the future and where growth is going to be.
 - Have the flexibility to adapt to changing demographics.
 - Have all interested parties actively involved (city, county, planners, etc., to figure out how to market to the consumer meaning voters, taxpayers)
 - Look at what other communities our size - have done that has been successful – learn from other places.
- It is in the interest of the School Board and District to:
 - Have facilities that are educationally efficient, conducive to problem solving and structured to meet the needs of students, parents and the intent of the facility.
 - Understand what we can and cannot control.
 - Understand how other elected bodies have had a role in shaping the choices we make.
 - Recognize that school buildings are more than an educational facility but a vital part of community.
 - Address acute needs as soon as possible (i.e., Jim Darcy, Central School)

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

- Meeting the needs of kids
- Choices in learning options (i.e., PAL; Montessori, etc.)
- Small school feel
- Schools forming communities within themselves (size matters – in large schools kids can drop through the cracks)
- Diversity in size, programming, needs
- Teachers' excellent attention to students with special needs
- Students' interest in learning and pride in their school community
- Great teachers
- Having a voice
- Autonomy
- The Central School location
- Any schools
- The District's ability to meet individual academic needs
- Uniqueness of Helena schools as focal points of neighborhoods
- Walkability
- Continuity

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

- A 21st Century learning environment with different learning spaces, collaborative opportunities, and clean safe buildings
- Improved learning environments
- Opportunity to meet the demand/desire for Montessori education/classrooms
- Bridge the divide between the valley and city and East Helena (looking at all kids that live in the District)
- High priority placed on what's best for our students above a building
- Sense of community for the entire District
- Class size
- Equality among buildings and opportunities for learning
- Safe, secure schools
- Smart responsible growth
- Choice for families
- Partnership with developers in support of schools
- Responsible community planning
- Better meet the physical needs of students with special needs
- Ability to innovate in our schools
- Ability to focus on academic achievement
- Science, art, music, technology options in elementary schools
- High schools that are the right size for students in that school
- Smaller middle schools
- Community school for everyone – look at where kids are and build schools where they are needed so kids have community schools
- Regain a school at the Central School location because it is a “neighborhood” school; it has a great footprint; it serves a unique population; it is connected to downtown; and it has community value and vitality
- Regain community trust between all parties (taxpayers, District, Board members, staff)
- Gain community confidence in the District (which is important for our volunteers)
- Trust of the public that they are getting value for their money
- Understanding vested interests so people support this process
- Buy-in from the valley and others
- Move to the best practice of re-drawing school boundaries more often than occurs now

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

- Have multiple discussions among stakeholders that take into account what's important in the community, the City Growth Plan and community values.
- View/treat all stakeholders as equals in discussions.
- Bring the valley and the town together in discussions – rather than separated.
- Create opportunities for those not at these meetings to see/get the meeting summaries and have their clarifying questions answered (i.e., a District point person available).
- Look at bringing in “others” who were successful with facilities improvement including how they did it and what it cost.
- Do an “autopsy” on the failed bond in Helena and learn from it – Identify what's realistic and what isn't.