

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

December 7, 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 participants to the session and explained that he would like to re-start the conversation about facilities and how they support educational goals. He referred to information attached to the agenda that provided demographic data and a map showing the location of Helena Public Schools. The Superintendent explained that he and the School Board are hoping for an open, collaborative process with the community and that only these 3 steps have been defined at this point:

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

The Superintendent thanked those in attendance 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 asked participants to honor the following discussion 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 follow the ground rules. The group agreed and encouraged their 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. Those questions and participant responses are as follows.

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

- I don't like being a person who complains about the end result – without being involved.
- I came to learn.
- My kids have experienced poor facilities/problems with facilities. I'm resentful about who didn't get it done before now - so I'm here to do it.
- I'm working personally to try to get a better connection between school decisions and land use decisions.
- The elementary school across the street from my house improves my life in many ways.
- I'm here to find out more information.
- Education is one of the foundations of society and it's important to be involved.

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

We believe:

- In a cradle to career ready approach to education and that academic success starts in early childhood.
- That schools should be secure and safe structurally.
- That schools should be affordable to the electorate and worth the investment.
- In neighborhood schools and walkability.
- Schools are a critical part of our community and all students deserve a community.
- In the importance of 21st century technology.
- Support services should be in buildings and support the school community.
- That the District should have comparable learning across the District.
- That the City, County and District should work together in planning.
- That local decisions should conform to state and federal laws.
- That we should be a trauma-informed District.
- Facilities should meet projected enrollment and be built in phases of their need.
- In flexible learning facilities that provide for collaboration and critical thinking.
- In an ongoing process.
- That schools should be permanent structures with quality learning spaces.
- In fiscal responsibility that aligns with budget.
- That schools should have healthy food and environment - a health center.
- In accommodating different learning styles through programs such as Montessori, PEAK, etc.
- In planning and preparing for buildings that are or will no longer be used.
- That history and culture should be preserved and respected for our buildings.
- That a healthy city center impacts the community and schools.

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

- It's in the interest of all students to:
 - Have and meet minimal standards of achievement and behavior;
 - Have learning opportunities;
 - Have a range of learning opportunities (e.g. Special Needs).
- It's in the interest of teachers and students to have equality across the District.
- It's in the interest of the community and student to have humanitarian education, art and music valued and part of the District's education program.
- It's in the interest of the community to recognize Helena's standing in academic achievement. (What can we learn from other communities?)
- It's in the interest of students and teachers to:
 - Have school building and classroom improvements;
 - Have healthy food;
 - Have acknowledgment of the value of student interests and points of view – kids should have input.
- It's in the interest of low income neighborhoods and the community to:
 - Have the need for walkable neighborhood schools recognized;
 - To have public health services.
- It's in the interest of the School District and everyone to utilize community expertise (i.e., invite planners, historic preservation, buildings and renovation experts, etc).
- It's in the interest of the taxpayer to have an affordable school district.
- It's in the interest of all people to have all facilities maintained.
- It's in the interest of citizens and homeowners to:
 - Have Districts follow a business model that includes maintenance;
 - Have stability in school locations.
- It's in the interest of the Helena community and future generations to have long-term city and county planning.
- It's in the interest of teachers, students, taxpayers, the City and County to build community support by involving more diverse citizen representation and organizations.
- It's in the interest of the District and the community to have forward thinking with a long-term facilities plan K-12 including priorities.

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

- Walkability; amount of time on the road/bus' accessibility; proximity
- A vibrant and dynamic community
- Maintaining a place where people want to live.
- Our sense of the Helena community
- Focus on academics

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

- A school district that acts as a magnet for bringing people here
- Outside experts to help us plan
- A community plan that is collaborative and comprehensive
- The Board and Superintendent who engender trust and transparency
- An understanding of what the taxpayers will tolerate
- A comprehensive vision - 21st Century schools
- Facilities that allow for academic growth
- Updated buildings safe for today's issues (i.e., gun violence, mold, health, etc.)
- Facilities that allow teachers to learn from one another
- Facilities that allow children to be respected and taught respect
- Recognition that there may be legislative answers
- Individualized learning

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

- Communicate/educate the 72% of taxpayers who don't have kids in the system (aging community; flat enrollment)
- Connect with people – face time
- Be genuine so people don't feel like an outcome has already been determined
- Compromise when possible
- Involve leaders who can represent interest groups stakeholders
- Process should represent vulnerable/disadvantaged populations and populations of different socioeconomic standing
- Let the community know about the benefits of schools to the community
- Study similar communities
- Have outside expertise present possibilities
- Cost of education will not be a detriment to professional instruction
- Process should rebuild trust between the community the and Board of trustees
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What would success look like in the end?

- A long range plan and anything that is proposed fits into the larger plan
- Whatever proposal is put before the public embraces progressive education (“child-centered” learning; enriched learning environments; multi-grade environments, etc.)
- Long range plan aligns with community growth plans
- Long range school facilities proposals take into account other community needs (open space, jail, fair grounds, YMCA, infrastructure, etc.)
- Facilities are safe, updated, secure and modern
- Structural design meets future needs
- Reinvestment occurs in historic buildings – keep history but make them modern
- Passing a bond
- Result of 60% of the community are in favor (rather than only % to pass bond)
- Every student has a safe place to go to school
- Peaking community interest in how the needs of facilities have evolved
- No more “town” versus “valley”