

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

December 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 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

#### **Why did you come to the meeting?**

- I want to see an unbiased process with the assistance of people who know how to do this including a comprehensive plan K-12.
- I want to be more of the solution – be more pro-active in hearing others.
- I think it’s important to be part of the process.
- I want to make sure there is a school at 402 N. Warren.
- I came to see how the process is moving forward and be part of it.

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

We believe:

- In individualized learning that is supported by facilities
- In safe, adequate schools that are maintained in a timely manner with new facilities as needed.
- In security within the facility including fences, safe playgrounds, good visuals, secure entries, etc.
- That schools are a reflection of our selves and our community – How we present ourselves matters.
- That schools should reflect how we value our community.
- That public schools are public and all stakeholders should be involved.
- That transparency is important.
- In neighborhood schools – walkability means more than distance - it involves safety.
- The quality of a school within a neighborhood benefits the community at large.
- In embracing diversity because a diverse set of learning environments should be available to all students.
- In the importance of a comprehensive plan that encompasses both the needs of each school and the repurposing of each school.
- In keeping and recruiting quality teachers with good working environments.
- That sustainability in a variety of ways must be considered.
- Community engagement and understanding are important to the success of the process.
- In thoughtful consolidation of resources.
- That the health and well-being of students are as important as academics – educating the whole child.
- In equal opportunity for all students and in meeting the current demand related to those opportunities (e.g., Montessori).
- That it’s important to recognize the impact of our school facility decisions on neighborhood character, property values and future development patterns.
- That school facilities should facilitate learning and that is a complex concept that needs exploring before buildings are designed/redesigned.

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

- It's in the interest of students regardless of income to have consistent, comparable facilities and educational opportunities.
- It's in the interest of all children and staff to work and learn in a safe and healthy environment.
- It's in the interest of all students to access 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology and STEM based learning.
- It's in the interest of disadvantaged students in particular, to have an advocate in facilities discussions and planning.
- It's in the interest of the community to explore Magnet (STEM, etc.) schools.
- It's in the interest of students and teachers to have facilities that are fully accessible both in and outdoors.
- It's in the interest of students and teachers to have sufficient onsite communal space (i.e., gyms, cafeteria, assembly areas, et.).
- It's in the interest of students to have diverse learning experiences.
- It's in the interest of all children to have a place in their neighborhood school.
- It's in the interest of the community and public health to have walkable, bikeable schools and the facilities to support them.
- It's in the interest of children to be learning in quality and equal facilities.
- It's in the interest of teachers to teach at equitable and improved facilities.
- It's in the interest of the entire community to improve educational facilities.
- It's in the interest of homeowners to improve the education system because it improves their home values.
- It's in the interest of the community and the world to have energy efficient schools
- It's in the interest of the District to improve inefficiencies as well as the entire operating budget to identify and improve inefficiencies (i.e., energy efficiency; bus routes; numbers of schools related to staffing, etc.).
- It's in the interest of taxpayers to have a District that is fiscally responsible.
- It's in the interest of taxpayers to have increases come gradually and for there to be long term planning.
- It's in the interest of taxpayers to have a comprehensive long-term pre-K-12 plan.
- It's in the interest of taxpayers and voters to understand the long-term plan and that it is a continual, ongoing process.
- It's in the interest of business to have an outstanding education system.
- It's in the community's public safety interest to have school buildings that are well maintained and in use.
- It's in the interest of the community to have playgrounds and outdoor spaces that are equally maintained and improved.
- It's in the interest of the High Schools to have a PAL program in a safe and inviting location.
- It's in the interest of all schools to function as community centers.
- It's in the interest of the District and the community to solve immediate problems (Central, PAL, etc.) even if the bond discussion falters.
- It's in the interest of the community to have clear enrollment zones (attendance areas) and transparent processes and criteria for updating them.

**What “interests”... cont.**

- It's in the interest of the community to have an incremental, comprehensive bond.
- It's in the interest of the community to understand the long term impact of a plan on the entire community.
- It's in the interest of the community to have a process that does not divide the valley from the city.
- It's in the interest of the community to have community master planning coordinated with education.
- It's in the interest of students to not have technology and automation be substitutes for learning environments nor lock students into particular jobs.

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

- School individuality (each can be our own way); more opportunity per individual students; sense of community within)
- Larger schools – school site diversity
- PEAK; PAL
- Small schools where kids can walk to school
- Central school
- Safe buildings where they are safe
- Outdoor space we already have
- School nurses
- Great teachers
- Support staff – nurses, counselors, speech therapists, etc.
- Relatively high graduation rate
- Montessori education

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

- Better access to improved outdoor spaces
- Safety and security
- Staff space
- Not having negative facility elements in school as distractions – healthy, functional optimal learning environments
- Technology space
- Sunlight in classrooms
- Limited time on buses
- Better future planning and ongoing conversation about plans
- Gym space
- Space for all things (groups, computers, etc.)
- Locating of high schools (accessibility, parking, busing, etc.)
- Cooking – Prepare lunches and teach cooking
- Space for FLS classrooms – updated and sufficient
- Class size is the “right size” with boundaries managed accordingly
- Boundary adjustments
- Optimization of school utilization
- More professional collaboration

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

- Start over – work toward an educated and involved electorate
- What do people want to know?
- Increase involvement within the City
- Provide demographic information
- Get the City and County on board
- Have a check in later with the groups
- Do a telephone survey – Why didn't you vote for the bond? Why did the bond fail? What would people support going forward?
- Do public outreach education
- Determine how people communicate and how we reach a larger spectrum of the community
- What's the vision and long term plan? Support the plan with information
- Use data to develop the plan
- Start small and build trust
- Can there be more than one approach for schools under an overall vision? Can schools have unique sizes and programs?
- Focus on the individual needs of students (SES, Special Needs, Transportation, etc.)
- Can we examine needs versus wants
- What is the whole picture – Is there going to be redistricting? Do it before the bond
- Describe flexible facilities including space, maximum flexibility, and ability to change with technology
- Prioritize spending so people can afford the taxes; educate about the cost per tax payer
- Make a value judgment to determine what we want our community to look like: Where do we want to see our growth?
- Find ways to build trust; establish trigger points

**What would success look like in the end?**

- Passing a bond by informed citizens who see a benefit for education
- The community is proud of its education system
- Successful kids across the District

**What do people need to know to be informed voters?**

- Security issues
- Where money has gone and helped (this will help with trust)
- Personal stories
- Clear long-term vision
- Space ratios – what works and doesn't and why
- Cost including tax increase; dollars needed to run a school
- Visual graphs
- Pictures of actual problems (virtual tours; info-graphics – fast, factual and visual)
- Floor plans and flow

**What do people need to know... cont.**

- How money will be managed well
- How educated children are important to our future
- Demographics – how the community is growing and changing; sustaining a school population
- Why/how space is important – Why do we care about how the physical facility matters?
- What problems created the bond and possible resolutions
- Thoughtful process to build trust with the community
- Maps
- Explain that there won't be one perfect solution