

PUBLIC SCHOOLS ELEMENT

Introduction

The purpose of this element is to set forth Recommendations and Action Strategies for the county with regard to the development of public school facilities through the year 2020. This element focuses on growth-related issues associated with school facilities and does not address matters of curriculum. Public educational facilities are depicted on Map # 13, *Educational Facilities and Libraries* (Appendix I).

Public Input

Concerns regarding schools captured only 2.7% of the comments of the Community Meetings and did not place within the top 20 Summary Comments. Comments that were received were fairly evenly split between praise for the current system and facilities and suggestions for improvement.

The *Designing Our Future* ballot results regarding education were as follows:

- Fund better facilities and top quality teachers...39.6% of votes
- Improve learning environment/grades by using character training, discipline, and parental/community involvement...25.3% of votes
- Keep our youth interested in school...10.3% of votes
- Support high tech training and preparation...9.5% of votes
- Upgrade and broaden curriculum...7.2% of votes
- Exceed standards for pre-school thru life-long learning...5.1% of votes
- Focus on higher education (4-year and graduate degrees)...3.0% of votes

The quality of the public school system was among the top issues identified by the 1993 *Comprehensive Land Use Plan* questionnaire.

Recommendations & Action Strategies

Recommendation PS-01: Take a leadership role in school facilities planning.

School facilities improvements constitute one of Henderson County Government's largest capital improvement responsibilities. According to the Henderson County

Public School System, 8 of the county's 21 public schools were over-capacity during the 2003-2004 school year. In order to partially alleviate this situation, the School System has proposed renovation / expansion projects for four elementary schools as well as the construction of one new elementary school. The total renovation cost is estimated to be approximately \$34,500,000, a figure that does not include new construction.

There is an obvious relationship between school capacity, capital improvement needs, and population growth. Most over-capacity schools are located within townships that have experienced the fastest growth since 1990, including Blue Ridge and Clear Creek.

Those who plan for future school needs must have a solid understanding of school capacity coupled with an understanding of the number of students, now and in the future, who will use them. Growth has outpaced the carrying capacity of many schools because Henderson County has traditionally focused on catching up with existing deficiencies; and Henderson County has not proactively managed growth so as to control the timing of development in relationship to budgetary and capacity concerns.

The remedy to this situation lies in projecting long-term population trends in each school planning area, developing plans that identify projected long-term needs, and incorporating those plans into long-term capital improvement programs.

Recommendation PS-02: Schools should function as focal points for communities.

Traditionally, schools have served as focal points for community life. This role has diminished, in part, as schools have moved away from developed areas in search of larger, more affordable development sites. The County will strive to utilize schools as engines of community development and centers of community life.

Among other things, this may mean opening schools for more after-hours use by the public, developing higher density residential development and compatible commercial development around school facilities, and designing schools and adjacent neighborhoods for walkability and connectivity to pedestrian and public transit infrastructure. It may also mean allowing for greater flexibility in school size and property size, building up rather than out, and bringing schools into closer proximity to adjacent uses. These things require proactive planning, as well as agreed-upon site selection and design criteria that envision a more community-centered school atmosphere.

In the near term, implementing such a recommendation is easier said than done. Practices such as those noted above may conflict with prevailing facilities selection and design procedures that are driven in part by cost, as well as by State guidelines. Also, many of the County's existing schools are located in places where opportunities for such a development pattern are limited by topography, utilities, and transportation concerns. Implementation will require long-term coordination, creativity, forethought, and vision, as well as a commitment to quality that takes precedence over more immediate cost constraints.

A. Develop a long-range public school facilities master plan.

Henderson County will work jointly with the Henderson County Board of Education to develop a long-range public school facilities master plan (hereafter, "schools plan"). The schools plan will:

- a) Identify all significant capital improvement needs through the year 2020.
- b) Prioritize identified needs into 2, 5, and 10-year capital request plans.
- c) Identify near-term sites for new facilities.
- d) Form the basis for the School System's annual capital budget requests.
- e) Guide the County's Strategic Plan and Capital Improvement Program.
- f) Identify needs based upon a sound understanding of near and long-term population growth and population distribution trends.
- g) Relate to a countywide recreation master plan (hereafter, "recreation plan").
- h) Relate to a countywide sewer and water master plan (hereafter, "sewer and water plan").
- i) Relate to Community Plans.

B. Consider incorporating mechanisms that link public school capacity and long-range public schools master plans to the land development permitting process into County land development ordinances.

School capacity and related budgetary expenditures are directly affected by land development activities. In order to truly manage the fiscal impact of long-term school facility improvement needs, it is necessary to establish linkages between school capacity and facilities planning, and land use planning and development review / permitting. Such linkages will need to be identified through more detailed study. Several examples from other jurisdictions in North Carolina can be found in Appendix 03: Other Documents, Public Schools Examples.

C. Establish site selection criteria for new schools and site design criteria for all schools.

The County and the School System will collaborate to create site selection and design criteria for existing and new schools. Among others, the following should be taken into consideration in the identification of new school sites as part of Community Plans and the long-range public school facilities master plan, as well as in the design and construction of new schools and in the remodeling of existing schools.

- a) The re-use of existing facilities whenever possible.
- b) Small schools on compact sites.
- c) “Fragmented” school sites where practical (for example, allowing sports fields to exist off-site in adjacent neighborhoods).
- d) Making schools pedestrian-friendly with safe and adequate bicycle, pedestrian, and greenway connections.
- e) Utilizing school facilities for other public uses (“shared facilities”) such as parks and recreation sites, public libraries, community college remote sites, remote government offices, etc.
- f) Connecting schools to public transportation, public water, and public sewer systems whenever possible.
- g) Account for road capacity and traffic concerns in facility location and design.

In order to be consistent with and to facilitate the use of criteria such as those listed above the County will consider incorporating walkability measures into its land development codes. The County will also explore opportunities to modify zoning around existing and new school facilities to allow high-density residential and compatible mixed-use commercial development. This should occur through the Community Planning process.