March 15, 2016

The Honorable Emma Violand-Sanchez, Chair
The Arlington County School Board
1426 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, Virginia 22207

Re: Stratford School – Schematic Design

The Stratford Middle School Building Level Planning Committee (BLPC) is pleased to share our recommendation for the schematic design of this new neighborhood middle school. During schematic design we confirmed our concept design recommendation of “West with High Road”.

Overview

We have met 22 times since last April, working closely with APS staff, County staff, design professionals, traffic engineers and community members to identify the best building massing and site access for an addition to support a 1000-student neighborhood middle school by 2019. Our committee includes 5 APS educators, 7 PTA leaders, 8 civic association representatives, 3 historic preservation experts and a Facility Advisory Committee (FAC) member. Together we have carefully studied the many challenges of this site, including three prior building additions, historically protected facades and viewsheds, pedestrian safety challenges, vehicular access by only small yield-to streets, steep topography, stream and tree protection areas, abutting residential properties and existing community recreation amenities. We considered at least 12 building massing options and 9 site access options, with community input at each meeting and extensive discussions with the Arlington Historic Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB), Public Facilities Review Committee (PFRC) and county staff liaisons throughout the process.

Our recommendations are consistent with our recommendations at concept design, with the benefit of considerable additional design and analysis over the last 4 months:

1. **Addition site and massing** – We strongly recommend (11 for, 1 against) the 40,000 square foot “West” addition, on the existing Stratford Program parking and bus loop. This addition will enable the school to meet instructional and common area needs for 1000 students. It also centralizes and makes universally accessible major community-accessible amenities, including the media center, entrance lobby, auxiliary gym and locker rooms. Finally, the addition ties together the existing park fields, school fields and interior space, while celebrating and honoring the school’s civil rights history. We believe many of these elements are necessary to ensure that the new Stratford can well serve generations of students, and the broader community, for generations. These elements will ensure an experience comparable to that of peers attending other neighborhood middle schools in Arlington.
2. **Renovation scope.** – We recommend selective renovation to the existing building to improve universal access and refresh the instructional and common spaces. The BLPC voiced unanimous support for:

- painting and limited renovation/repair where classroom use is changing.
- replacing and adding lockers; replacing broken bathroom partitions;
- adding an “East” elevator next to the music wing to connect floors 1-3; (cost: $0.38M)
- replacing all ceiling and lighting in the existing building with the same LED system to be used in the addition. (cost: $1.3M)

Given intense budget pressures for APS capital projects across the County, this renovation scope is considerably more modest than previously planned, but enables the whole school building to feel like a unified and inspiring new school for all students and community members.

In addition, we recommend that the school board to direct APS staff to:

- confirm all reused furniture, equipment, technology, fixtures are up to current educational specifications, and provide plan and budget implications for upfront or phased upgrades
- work closely with design team and county staff to define energy-efficient options for restoring the full window height in the south-facing classrooms. About two thirds of the window area is made of glass block. While still prominent from the outside, the interior has been covered with drywall to reduce heat gain and glare. This reduces daylighting in half of the classrooms by 67%. The initial estimate of $500,000 did not include energy-efficiency modeling and optimization, so the total cost is not yet known. Importantly, this work, and potentially other elements of the renovation could be supported through historic preservation grant programs or major maintenance dollars.

3. **Access and safety** – We recommend the “High Road” connecting Vacation Lane to Old Dominion, for family vehicle traffic and emergency access. The BLPC strongly supports (9 for, 0 against) this investment to reduce neighborhood traffic, slow speeding on Old Dominion and improve pedestrian safety all around the school. In addition, we recommend both immediate and long-term transportation demand management and traffic law enforcement to maximize pedestrian safety and minimize car trips for this school site. This includes incentives for staff transit/carpooling, expanded bike rack locations, three crossing guards, time-limited vehicle restrictions on Vacation and 23rd St, curb bump outs, raised crosswalks, all-way stops (at 23rd/Vacation, Vacation/school parking lot), remote drop offs and flashing school zone speed/safety signage.

After extensive survey, grading planning and fire code analysis was completed during schematic design, the incremental cost of this site access is expected to be $230,000. To add this access at a later date would be 5-20 times this cost, would cause major
disruption to the school and park programs at that time and is not guaranteed to be allowed by Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT).

Though VDOT has confirmed their support for this connection to the state-owned Old Dominion, County staff recently expressed a preference for keeping access only from Vacation Lane. We encourage School Board leadership to coordinate with County Board leadership now to avoid a potential delay or redesign of the project later. In our view, any proposed changes to the recommended site plan should continue to separate cars, buses and pedestrians on Vacation Lane; improve fire/emergency vehicle access and travel times; and prioritize pedestrian safety.

4. **History** – We recommend that the school board designate members of a historic interpretation advisory group by April, to support the BLPC and APS staff in designing the specific signage and celebration of the school’s important civil rights history. These elements are to be funded through a $250,000 fund for historic interpretation (in addition to the project cost). Convening this group in April/May will help ensure community priorities and recommendations are incorporated fully during design development.

5. **Project Cost** – We recommend an estimated total project cost of $37.26M, including $20.14M for a 40,000 sf addition, $8.42M for renovation of the existing building and $8.15M in site costs.

During the site selection process in 2014, the estimated cost for a 1000-seat school on this site was $29.2M to $56.5M. The School Board selected $29.2M, the low end of that range as the project goal in the CIP. This included $15.17M for a 45,000 sf addition, $8.04 for renovation and $5.96 for site costs.

Since then there has been unusually high escalation of construction costs, both locally and nationally. In addition, the site topography and conditions make this an unusually difficult and expensive site to modify. As a result, the initial cost estimates for the proposed 45,000 sf addition to serve 1000 students ranged from $43M to $47M, and site costs have continued to climb due to existing conditions that do not meet code (ADA, fire, stormwater).

At concept plan approval you advised us to proceed with schematic design considering both a “bare bones” 35,000 sf addition (vs. the CIP plan for 45,000 sf addition) and priority additional investments in the building addition or renovation to balance instructional, safety, historic, recreational, community and environmental needs for the new Stratford Middle School.

After considerable study and discussion, we recommend an **addition** of at least 40,000 to provide adequate common areas for the 1000-student middle school and enhanced ADA access for all users. We recommend a **renovation** scope that includes ADA-accessibility, limited instructional space upgrades, paint and energy-efficient lighting improvements to unify the look and feel of the building, support student achievement
and reducing energy costs. Nearly all of the higher-than-expected site costs are needed to meet code; in addition we recommend including the $230,000 scope to connect Vacation Lane to Old Dominion and continuing to prioritize pedestrian safety.

During this phase of site design, APS staff and consultants completed extensive additional land surveys, ADA code analysis, fire code analysis, tree inventory and detailed cost estimates. Unfortunately, this work clarified that the concept design cost estimate, though higher than the CIP cost estimate, was still 15% too low. An additional $1.77M in site costs is needed to cover these base case site costs. Since these costs are in no way related to additional design scope, the BLPC recommends that these costs be added to the base project cost rather than counted against the $5M conditional funding.¹

Specifically, the BLPC:

a) Strongly recommends an additional investment of $2.58M to fund an adequately-sized media center and auxiliary gym in the new addition.

b) Unanimously recommends an additional renovation investment of $0.35M to add an elevator near the music wing addition, allowing more standard travel times for all users in this elongated building.

c) Unanimously recommends an additional renovation investment of $1.3M to replace all ceiling and lighting in the existing building with the same LED lighting system to be used in the addition.

d) Does not recommend additional sustainability investments in either addition or renovation at this time, including green roof, PV/solar panels, graywater recovery and geothermal. This is due to the relatively long payback periods, recently upgraded HVAC systems, intense capital budget pressures and better opportunities for demonstration and quicker payback of similar measures on other APS capital projects. PV could be added retroactively in the future.

e) Recommends that APS staff quantify additional renovation optional costs and apply any savings identified during the project to these investments:
   i) Restoring the original glass block windows in an energy efficient design, bringing back the historical design and tripling daylight in classrooms.
   ii) Ensuring existing furniture, fixtures, equipment are consistent with the new addition and current educational specifications.

¹ As discussed during concept design, this is not an easy site and never has been. When selected for the first new Arlington County junior high school in 1950, it was called “Arlington’s most ambitious school building project.” At that time, “the challenges presented by the site [including highly varied topography, steep slopes, heavily wooded, a creek that ran across the property, surrounded by residential development on three sides] were recognized and discussed by the School Board, but ultimately it was felt that these potential difficulties were offset by the convenient and desirable location. … . The design and construction expenses incurred in accommodating the site were significant, with the grading contract alone amounting to $49,600, or approximately 3 percent, of the actual construction cost of $1,496,604. This caused considerable controversy among Arlington County tax payers who felt that the expense could have been avoided by the selection of a more regular site.”
f) Recommends that County and APS staff work together to pursue historic preservation grants and/or maintenance dollars to offset this cost of some of these renovation items.

g) Strongly recommends (9 for, 0 against) keeping the planned connection to Old Dominion. The incremental site cost would be approximately $230,000.

h) Recommends further study and site cost estimates during the design development phase to ensure an ADA-accessible pedestrian path from Old Dominion to the school/park site.

Closing

After nearly a year of grappling with this challenging school expansion, we certainly appreciate the many tough decisions you have to make about meeting our student capacity needs. We ask for your concurrence with the West Option, High Road and $37.26M estimated project cost. During the Stratford Middle School design development and construction, we will continue to balance instructional, community and budget on this do-once, do-it-right site, while continuing our collaboration with others in our community to complete the project for a fall 2019 opening.

Sincerely,

Susan R. Cunningham
Chair, Building Level Planning Committee, Stratford Middle School Project

CC: Nancy Van Doren
James Lander
Barbara Kanninen
Reid Goldstein
Dr. Patrick Murphy
John Chadwick
Ben Burgin
Bill Herring
Stratford Middle School BLPC Members
Attachment 1: Illustrations of BLPC renovation priority areas

A. Current ceiling tile (water damage, student painting), lighting, fixtures and equipment:

B. Glass block original intent – drywall applied for energy management means daylighting in these classrooms is reduced by 2/3 from the original design (and almost no “borrowed” light reaches the interior hallways)