



*Neighborhood Advisory Council**
Springfield, Missouri

Springfield Public Schools Proposed Bond Issue Observations and Perspectives
March 17, 2017

During the period February 15-March 17, 2017, a committee of neighborhood representatives studied the proposed SPS Facility Master Plan bond issue on the April 4 ballot. These neighborhood representatives are a portion of the members of Springfield's Neighborhood Advisory Council. The NAC comprises representatives of Springfield's 16 registered neighborhood associations, which together cover a geographic area including about half the households and over 42 percent of the Springfield population. This document provides the observations and perspectives of the committee. It is provided as a public service to the voters as they consider the proposed bond issue.

The committee met with representatives of SPS and a group opposing the bond issue, Save R12 Schools. In addition, members of the committee performed independent research related to the topic including review of research reports, dialog with friends and colleagues, interviews with nationally recognized researchers, and study of SPS educational proficiency data. They crafted questions for both SPS and Save R12 Schools representatives and reviewed their responses. Importantly, they also shared perspectives based on their individual experiences in and around their existing neighborhood schools.

At a high level, and perhaps in a broader context than the bond issue that is near at hand, we observe the following:

1. School facilities are in significant need of improvement and are admittedly not equitable.
2. Neighborhood schools are beloved in Springfield, particularly in its older and close-knit neighborhoods. They are at the heart of dozens of our City's micro-communities.
3. SPS should work more directly with neighborhoods to better understand the symbiosis between a neighborhood school and its teachers and staff, the quality of life experienced by its nearby residents, and the educational success of the children that traverse between school and neighborhood every school day. If potential new locations and consolidations must occur, we should change the conversation from "surplus schools" to economic development and enhanced quality of life. How do we think about the impacts at the very real and personal level of the child and family coping with substantial change? How do we make that a success story?
4. SPS data clearly demonstrates that economic diversity among student bodies improves educational attainment. Public/private/neighborhood partnerships, a long-range vision and commitment coupled with targeted facilities investments could go far to advance economic diversity in our schools, thereby raising the attainment and aspirations of a great many of our students. We won't get there overnight, but could be well on the path if it be a primary goal to do so. Central High is a beacon and Westport is a cautionary tale.

More specific to the proposed bond issue, the following is a summary of the observations coming from our committee. As stated before, we offer them for consideration by the voters:

1. Among the committee members, there is strong support for our public schools, and there is not among them a “No new taxes” sentiment. There is diversity, however, in opinions of whether the proposed plan is the right plan.
2. There is palpable concern among some that we are faced with a choice of either supporting the proposed bond issue or perhaps never see improvements made – particularly for Northside facilities. We find that this is not the case. Should the bond issue fail, the SPS could recraft and come back to the voters in the future with a revised bond proposal, and our interpretation of comments from SPS officials is that they would likely do so and do so reasonably quickly. Our understanding from a legal perspective is that it could occur in a year if not sooner.
3. Our interpretation from comments made by SPS officials is that a key reason for the less-than-satisfactory condition of many SPS facilities is a decades-long practice of inadequate maintenance/deferred maintenance budgeting. We don’t state this as a criticism of anyone; we simply observe it. We find no line item in the proposed bond to address this matter, and our interpretation from comments made by SPS officials is that the existing related budget will not be increased. This should be more proactively addressed to avert building deterioration to occur again.
4. In general, the percentage of students achieving math and language arts proficiency in SPS schools with low free/reduced lunch student populations are about 20 percent higher than in SPS schools with high free/reduced student populations. Research performed elsewhere indicates that this gap normally exists among students upon their entry into Kindergarten, and carries forth through the school years, thus Pre-K may be the single best time to make substantial gains for these students. The SPS proposed plan calls for a significant increase in Pre-K classrooms. Our interpretation from SPS officials about where these Pre-K classrooms will be built is that this has not been determined. We hope they will be targeted to the City’s socioeconomic areas that need them most and thereby help to close this substantial proficiency gap.
5. Our interpretation from comments made by SPS officials is that the cost of renovating buildings slated for closure would be higher than the cost of closing and building new ones elsewhere. They also admit that renovation costs were not estimated. We therefore have no basis to judge their comments and have concern that renovation does not appear to have been a base case from which to compare alternatives.

6. Sites have not been selected for the proposed new facilities, nor have we seen detailed conceptual plans for the proposed new buildings. From this we interpret that the cost breakdowns provided for Phase 1 are ballpark in nature; their accuracies dependent on the predictive capabilities of SPS staff and their consultants, and good guesses about costs of property.
7. The proposed bond issue makes commitments only to Phase 1 of the proposed master plan. At a high level, the plan calls for 1) North of Sunshine Street closures of 6-10 neighborhood school buildings and replacement/consolidations into 4 large elementary/middle combined campuses, and 2) South of Sunshine Street renovations (and not closures) of 7 neighborhood elementary schools and construction of two new high school gymnasiums.
8. The closest SPS experiential information for a combined elementary/middle school campus in a neighborhood with high free/reduced lunch student percentage is Westport. In comparing proficiency test results reported by SPS between elementary-level students at Westport, to those at York and Bissett Elementary Schools, which have similar free/reduced lunch student percentages, we observe that Westport is performing more poorly. Among these three, York has performed the best and is slated for closure in Phase 2. At the middle school level, Westport has tested worse than their peer schools Reed and Pipkin, even scoring less than 8% proficient in math just two years ago. There is debate about the causes of these test results differences as well as the increased violence at Westport, and SPS officials have indicated that they do not intend to follow the Westport model with the new combined campuses. Thus we conclude that the proposed combined campuses, while planned to be of similar size to Westport, follow an untried model in SPS high free/reduced lunch population areas. National research suggests larger schools can have a negative impact on academic achievement for students in poverty.
9. We do not see a correlation in SPS-reported data between student proficiency (in math and language arts) and school building age. And based on numerous examples cited by architectural firms and others elsewhere around the country, older buildings can and often are successfully and cost effectively retrofitted for new technology and innovative learning spaces. We cite Central High and its International Baccalaureate Program as a local success story. On this basis, we do not believe that the potential needs for new technology and novel learning spaces cannot be retrofitted into existing buildings with, in some cases, appropriate additions.
10. If the full Master Plan is implemented and since the new school locations are not known, as many as 19 neighborhoods could end up with either closed school buildings or be impacted with substantial traffic issues from new large consolidated schools. Almost all of these potentially affected neighborhoods are north of Sunshine Street. Our interpretation from SPS officials is that they appear to have no proactive financial commitment in their plan to address beneficial reuse of closed buildings. They have voiced commitment, but research of successful and rapid reuse elsewhere in the country requires substantial *financial* commitment. Therefore, we are concerned that the closures may result in serious negative impacts to property values, tax bases, and crime, and usher in general neighborhood deterioration. If this holds, and given that all of

the planned school closures are on the Northside, where poverty is highest, we might expect the student proficiency test gaps to widen and perhaps Zone Blitz gains negated. Regardless of the outcome of the bond election, we encourage SPS to work more directly with neighborhoods and the City to identify new opportunities for closed campuses and to make the investments necessary to preserve the quality of life for affected neighborhoods and the community as a whole.

11. Regarding transportation, when asked, SPS officials have indicated the increased cost of bussing will be fairly low – potentially just one more bus route needed. We are concerned, however, with the transportation impact for families who have intentionally located near existing schools so their kids can walk to school, and so parents without cars can respond quickly when a kid gets sick at school, or get to school events intended to engage them and the teachers. Particularly on the Northside, many families do not have reliable transportation or might only have one vehicle that the primary breadwinner takes to work. When their neighborhood school closes (under the plan), these kids and their parents may suddenly be faced with long walks – 15 blocks or more in some cases (those just shy of the minimum bussing distance criteria) – making just getting to and from school a significant challenge. We do not see a way that this negative impact is being addressed in the plan, and it may be an unavoidable consequence (“cost”) of school building closure. Over the full run of the proposed plan, we anticipate this matter will impact hundreds, if not over a thousand students, and likely negatively impact their learning outcomes.
12. We do not know how closely the proposed Phase 1 will need to be followed should the bond be approved. If there is substantial flexibility, then there may be great opportunity for the plan to be revised after bond passage to assure it is targeted to learning outcomes and safeguards micro-community, neighborhood, and thereby community health. If however, the plan would need to be tightly followed as written, then we need to understand that passage of the bond means commitment to this plan without much opportunity to revise it. For example, the plan calls for four combined elementary/middle school campuses in Phase 1, an admittedly untried model in high poverty areas. The plan does not call for starting with one, seeing how it performs for several years, and then deciding about others.
13. Our review of student counts at schools planned to be combined or redistricted suggest they may be significantly larger than the planned school size targets indicated in the plan. SPS officials have indicated that public input resulted in their setting a target of 300-450 students for elementary schools regardless of the socioeconomic condition of the student population. In the survey form used by SPS to assess this public input, “300-450” was the smallest size that could be chosen, and very many of our existing schools fall in the 150-300 range now – a size that we have been told researchers suggest is optimal for K-5. If asked, we suspect that a large percentage of survey respondents might have said they are happy with the size of schools they have now.
14. Many believe the likelihood of the State of Missouri enacting a plan for school vouchers is high. It is reasonable to speculate that if this occurs, a substantial number of charter schools could

form and/or many more students might move to existing parochial and private schools. Such changes could create a high risk that the financial planning premise for payment of the bonds and the anticipated bond ratings could be wrong, which could seriously impact the SPS financial condition across the board. Some of our members therefore recommend waiting a year or two before entering into a bond plan with a 30 year financial commitment would mitigate this risk. The financial plan could be crafted robust enough to withstand this kind of impact.

15. Researchers tell us that K-3 students in poverty perform best in very small class sizes (17 or less; the Tennessee STAR study recommended 10), with traditional classroom configurations, and without a high emphasis on technology in the classroom. Researchers say these kids do best in a structured environment, not in open-style formats that may be beneficial to kids with high academic preparation. SPS officials have indicated that the average K-1 class size across our system is 19 and 21 in 2nd and 3rd respectively. They have further indicated that under the plan, these levels will not be increased. While these levels are not at the optimum, we applaud the SPS for maintaining reasonably small classes (assuming their figures do not vary greatly across the system), and encourage this to continue regardless of the bond election outcome.

This document summarizes the perspectives of the NAC committee members that have studied and discussed the SPS bond issue. They, like all NAC representatives, believe that thoughtful and respectful dialog leads to reasoned discernment of issues. We present the information above to advance this dialog and hope that it encourages a stronger culture of engagement between the SPS and the neighborhoods in which its schools reside.

Coordinating Author: Pete Radecki, NAC Chair

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