

**MANDATORY REFERRAL REPORT NO. 03-21**

**Proposal to acquire land on Bailey Road in Cornelius's ETJ to serve as a future High School site**

**PROJECT PROPOSAL AND LOCATION:**

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools proposes to purchase approximately 68 acres on Bailey Road in Cornelius's extraterritorial jurisdiction to serve as a portion of a future high school site. Properties involved are 007-121-02, 03, 06, 07 & 08 and 007-122-05, 06, 07 & 08. It is proposed to use 1999 land banking funds to finance this transaction.

CMS previously purchased 36 acres (Mandatory Referral MR02-45) to land-bank for a future middle school site. The current proposal is to purchase adjoining land to the west of the land-banked site for the high school site, and to combine it with the land-banked site to create the high school site.

The current use of the site is primarily vacant land. Electric utility lines cross the site. The land use immediately surrounding the site is primarily vacant land with some low-density residential uses. CMS is also proposing to develop a middle school immediately to the west of this site (MR03-22).

Bailey Road – upon which this property fronts – runs from Old Statesville Road (NC115) to a dead-end east of the site. Bailey Road provides the only vehicular access to the site. There is a railroad grade crossing on Bailey just east of its intersection with Old Statesville Road, across which traffic to and from this site must cross.

**PROJECT JUSTIFICATION:**

The site is located in the northern portion of the county, and is within a targeted area for a new high school, according to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools *Long-Range School Facilities Master Plan 2003/04—2012/13* (draft), that is currently under consideration by the Board of Education. (The most recently adopted facility plan – the *Long Range School Facilities Master Plan 2001/02-2010/11* – does not call for a high school in this segment of the county.)

The proposed high school site lies within the 2003/04 North Mecklenburg High School home school boundary. North Mecklenburg, which is currently 153% utilized without mobile classrooms, lies approximately 6.6 miles south of this site. Hopewell High School is the second-closest CMS high school, located 7.6 miles southwest of the proposed high school site. Hopewell is currently 143% utilized without mobile classrooms. (No figures were provided as to utilization with mobile classrooms, or how many students attend these schools from outside the attendance areas.)

The high utilization numbers at North Mecklenburg and Hopewell high schools are partially a result of the population growth that has occurred in northern Mecklenburg County. The towns of Davidson, Cornelius and Huntersville have all grown significantly since 1990. Collectively the three towns (including the adjoining unincorporated areas of the county) increased in population from 22,220 to 49,447 (an increase of 122.5%) during the 1990's. Comparatively, Mecklenburg County grew by 36% during this same time period.

The construction of a new high school in the northern portion of the district would have the potential to relieve overcrowding at North Mecklenburg and/or Hopewell high schools. The proposed property is near existing densities of CMS high school students, as well as near areas of anticipated growth, thus providing for the long-term populating of a school at this site.

**CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED PUBLIC POLICIES:**

The proposed school site has RP zoning, which permits high schools as long as certain conditions are met, relating to setbacks, parking, and other site design considerations. The site size meets both CMS and state guidelines of developable acres for a 2,000-student high school.

A high school is called for in the northern portion of the county in accordance with the school district's *Long Range School Facilities Master Plan 2003/04 – 2012/13* (draft), that has yet to be approved by the school board.

The *Transit Station Area Joint Development Policies and Principles* adopted in early 2003 by elected bodies of all Mecklenburg municipalities as well as by the Board of Education, state that in order to maximize success of the planned rapid transit system, that public facilities (including schools) should wherever possible be located and designed so as to encourage transit ridership by patrons and visitors to those public facilities. Specifically, public entities are required to "encourage complementary public facilities (such as schools, parks/open space, libraries and social service organizations) at or near transit stations to serve both transit users and surrounding neighborhoods". Although the proposed school site lies within reasonable walking distance (1/2 mile) of the proposed north transit corridor alignment, it is not within walking distance of a potential transit station location.

**CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED LAND USE PLANS:**

The Cornelius land development classification for the site is Rural Preservation (RP). This district is coded to accommodate very low-density residential development and agricultural uses, protect natural vistas, and landscape

features that define our rural heritage. The town does allow “civic uses” in this zone under prescribed conditions involving parking, setbacks, and other site development considerations. Schools are considered by definition to be civic uses. However, the development of school facilities could serve to encourage additional development around the periphery of the school property, especially as infrastructure is extended to the school site.

The Town of Cornelius has developed a “Cornelius East Vision Plan” aimed at guiding future development on about 2,300 acres east of NC115 and north of Mayes Road. The proposed school site is within that planning area. The outcome of this planning process prescribes the future land use of the school site to be “rural preservation” with the portion previously land-banked by the school district to be a civic use. The time frame for the Bailey Road extension is established at 5 to 10 years in this plan.

Cornelius town staff report that they wholeheartedly support the location of the middle school and the high school at this location, due primarily to the great joint use potential with the adjoining Bailey Road Park.

#### **PROJECT IMPACT:**

The proposed school (in conjunction with the proposed adjoining middle school) will cause increased traffic around the school site, particularly during two 30-minute periods in the morning and afternoon, and during special events. CMS has pledged to design the site and to work with permitting agencies to minimize this impact.

CMS also reports that the Town of Cornelius and the Town of Davidson will consider options for the extension of Bailey Road to the east, eliminating its status as a dead-end road. Site access currently is obtained exclusively from the dead-end Bailey Road after it crosses the Norfolk Southern railroad tracks. However, funding for roadway extension is reportedly to be provided by the private sector as areas further to the east of the site eventually develop. Although the ¾ mile extension of Bailey Road (to Davidson Concord Road) is on the Mecklenburg-Union Metropolitan Planning Organization’s (MUMPO) Thoroughfare Plan, the MUMPO Long Range Transportation Plan recommends no public funding for this project until after the year 2025.

#### **RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PUBLIC OR PRIVATE PROJECTS:**

The Town of Cornelius Parks and Recreation Department and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are teaming up together to create shared recreational facilities for the proposed high school as well as for the adjoining proposed middle school and for park users.

Charlotte Mecklenburg Utilities proposes in the 2004-08 Capital Investment Program in FY2004 to install a water main from the corner of Old Statesville Road and Bailey Road northward to provide additional water service in the area. Sanitary sewer will be extended to the site by CMS as part of site development.

In 2001, a consultant for the Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) and the NC Department of Transportation evaluated the railway grade crossings in the Norfolk Southern line between Charlotte and Mooresville. The Bailey Road grade crossing currently has no warning signals or arm gates. The consultant placed a high priority upon improvement of this crossing and recommended it to be improved with automatic warning devices (gates and flashers) that would cost an estimated \$500,000, although no funding sources or timelines were identified.

The proposed school site is located more than ½ mile from the proposed north corridor commuter rail line.

#### **ESTIMATED PROJECT COMPLETION DATE:**

The expected completion date is unknown at this time. The design and construction of the school are unfunded; thus completion date will be determined by the timing of a successful future bond referendum that will provide project funding.

#### **JOINT USE TASK FORCE REVIEW COMMENTS:**

The Joint Use Task Force reviewed this matter at their October 1, 2003 meeting. The park and recreation partnership between CMS and the Town of Cornelius was identified as the joint use opportunity. No other joint use opportunities were identified.

#### **CMPC STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends approval of the acquisition of this site for a future high school. However, staff has several concerns regarding access to the site, notably:

- given the *Joint Development Policies and Guidelines*, the lack of reasonable proximity of the school site to the north transit commuter corridor and to potential station locations represent a real lost opportunity for schools to become an integral component of a future transit-oriented development and to enable future site occupants to have direct and convenient access to the transit system
- The prescribed timeframe and funding uncertainties with respect to the Bailey Road extension make it likely that vehicular access to the site will be limited to Bailey Road from NC115 for a certain period of time following school

opening. Not only will this create the potential for significant congestion at the Bailey/NC115 intersection, but the uncertain funding status of the grade crossing safety improvements could create a safety issue near the site as well.

**CMPC PLANNING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:**

At their October 16, 2003 meeting, the Planning Commission recommended approval of this transaction by a 6-0 vote.

# MR 03-21

