

MANDATORY REFERRAL-REPORT NO. 02-42
PROPOSED MIDDLE SCHOOL ON SOUTH STREET IN CORNELIUS

PROJECT PROPOSAL AND LOCATION:

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools proposes to purchase approximately 32 acres in the Town of Cornelius to serve as a future middle school site. The site consists of parcel 007-062-10 and a portion of parcels 007-062-07 and 08, and is located at the end of South Street near Davidson Elementary School. Parcels 007-062-10 & 08 are located in the Neighborhood Residential ("NR") zoning district, and parcel 007-062-07 is in the Industrial Campus ("IC") district.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION:

The recently-approved 2002 school bonds included money for a new North Middle School to address growth and the need to replace the 240-seat Davidson IB middle school building. CMS states that the existing school cannot be economically and cost-effectively brought up to the school district's baseline standards for school facilities. A total of \$13.3 million was approved to build a smaller (600 to 900-seat) middle school, but in light of anticipated growth in the north, CMS reports future bond referenda to include a request for additional funding to increase capacity of this school to 1,200 seats, which is the baseline size for new middle schools. The new building would house a combination of the Davidson I.B. magnet program, and non-magnet students from within an assigned attendance area.

Bradley Middle School in the northern part of the county is 149% utilized without mobile classrooms, and Alexander Middle School also in the north is 135% utilized without mobiles. The high utilization numbers at Bradley and Alexander are partially a result of the population growth that has occurred in northern Mecklenburg County. The construction of a new middle school in the northern portion of the district would have the potential to relieve overcrowding at Bradley and/or Alexander Middle Schools.

CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED LAND USE PLANS AND PUBLIC POLICY:

The majority of the proposed school site is located in the NR zoning district, which would permit elementary schools under prescribed conditions. The remaining area is zoned IC and will need to be rezoned. Its size meets both CMS and state guidelines of developable acres for a 1,200-student middle school. CMS has committed to work with the towns on integrating the school into the planned Transit Oriented Development ("TOD") adjoining the site.

The placement of a middle school, at this location is inconsistent with the CMS *Long Range School Facilities Master Plan 2001/02 through 2010/11*, which was adopted by the Board of Education in February 2001. The Plan calls for no new middle schools in the northern part of the county until after 2011.

The Town of Cornelius Land Use Plan calls for the majority of the site to be developed with Medium Density Mixed Use Residential with the northwest corner of the site having a "special purpose" land use classification.

PROJECT IMPACT:

CMS reports that a middle school at this location is strategically located to address future growth in this region of the district in grades 6 through 8, and to relieve present and/or anticipated crowding in nearby middle schools - most notably Bradley and Alexander Middle Schools. The site is located within a short distance of Davidson Elementary and may create additional traffic in that area; however the Town has encouraged the proximity to the existing elementary school, the TOD and the existing residential neighbors to encourage a walkable environment for students.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PUBLIC OR PRIVATE PROJECTS:

The Town of Cornelius has approved a Transit Oriented Development on property adjacent to the site. The Towns of Davidson and Cornelius have committed to connect the proposed TOD to Davidson by opening South Street into the new development. In addition to the South Street extension, new roads are proposed to support connectivity between the towns and schools (Davidson Elementary & the proposed middle school) and the new private development.

The recently-completed transit Major Investment Study has identified a potential future commuter rail station in the vicinity of NC115 and Catawba Avenue, less than ½ mile from the site. Transit planning principles suggest that developments within the ½ mile radius conform to transit station land use principals, characterized by a mixture of uses, increased land use intensity, well-developed bicycle and pedestrian network, reduced parking and reliance upon automobiles, and increased attention to building and site design.

ESTIMATED PROJECT COMPLETION DATE:

The site would be purchased with 1999 Land Banking funds, upon which a 600 to 900-student middle school funded for \$13.3 million from the 2002 bonds would be constructed. Core spaces (office suites, cafeteria, gymnasium, etc.) would be sized to accommodate an eventual 1,200-seat building size which could be realized through funding from future bond revenues.

JOINT USE TASK FORCE REVIEW COMMENTS:

The Joint Use Task Force reviewed this application at their December 4, 2002 meeting. The following pertinent comments were made. The Town of Davidson has expressed interest in purchasing the old Davidson I.B. Middle School building from CMS once a new school facility is completed. The Town would preserve the structure and most likely use it as an annex to their town hall. Additionally, a joint Davidson-Cornelius recreation center has been in the planning stages for quite awhile, but it does not appear that it will become a reality. The location of the South Street property (centrally-located between the Cornelius and Davidson town centers and within an easy walk of the proposed transit station) with CMS as a third partner, could re-ignite the two-town recreation center idea at this location.

CMPC STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff notes that the construction of a middle school in northern Mecklenburg County is inconsistent with the school district's own Facilities Master Plan. Similarly, the Master Plan did not call for the replacement of the old Davidson I.B. building. Additionally, the placement of a middle school at this location does not appear to be consistent with Cornelius's land use plan.

Staff also notes the challenges of site accessibility which development of this site will create. However, the application stresses the cooperation between the Towns of Cornelius and Davidson in creating and extending grid systems to the edges of the site, which should serve to overcome limitations in site accessibility.

Nonetheless, the Davidson I.B. program has for several years been housed in an under-sized and obsolete facility. Development of a public school facility on the edge of a transit station area, using transit station land use and design principles in cooperation with two municipalities represents an exciting opportunity for transit-oriented development and joint use.

Staff therefore recommends approval of the acquisition of this property subject to the following conditions:

- CMS should abandon its prototype suburban-style school site and building designs in favor of a design philosophy and approach which intensifies land use, increases connectivity to adjoining land uses, minimizes the amount of land devoted to the automobile, and generally recognizes transit station area land use and facility design principles. This should, in turn, require the school district to need to acquire fewer than the 32 acres proposed for acquisition.
- The proximity of the Davidson Elementary school property to the subject parcels represents an opportunity to undertake shared usage of site amenities, further minimizing the amount of land which must be acquired and developed for the middle school.
- CMS and the Towns of Davidson and Cornelius, as well as the development community should continue to work toward the development of a grid street system which would connect the South Street area with the property proposed for development and the Transit Oriented Development proposed for further south.

CMPC PLANNING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION: At their December 17, 2002 meeting, the Planning Committee voted 7-0 to approve acquisition of the land, conditioned upon the school district being cognizant of staff's recommendation about the amount of land to be acquired, and upon optimizing the use of the South Street property.

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