

MANDATORY REFERRAL REPORT NO. 03-22

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

PROJECT PROPOSAL AND LOCATION:

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools proposes to acquire approximately 24 acres on Bailey Road to serve as a future middle school site. This site lies in the Town of Cornelius extraterritorial jurisdiction. The property (parcel 007-131-14) is currently owned by Cornelius Park & Recreation Department, and adjoins the Cornelius Bailey Road Park immediately to its west.

The current use of the site is primarily vacant. Electric utility lines cross the site. Properties to the north, east, and south are principally vacant with some rural density residential development. Immediately west of the site is the town's Bailey Road Park. To the west across Old Statesville Road (NC115) is an office park development. CMS is also proposing to develop a high school immediately to the east of this site (MR03-21). The Norfolk Southern "O" line (the future north transit corridor alignment for commuter rail) passes less than ½ mile west of the site.

Bailey Road – upon which the parcel fronts – runs from Old Statesville Road and dead-ends approximately one half mile east of the site. Bailey Road currently provides the only vehicular access to this site. There is a railroad grade crossing at Bailey Road immediately 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 Search Zone as identified in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools *Long-Range School Facilities Master Plan 2001/02—2010/11*. This plan projected a need for no new middle schools in the Northern Search Zone. However, the district's *Long Range School Facilities Master Plan 2003/04 – 2012/13* (draft) currently being considered by the Board of Education prescribes development of one new middle school with a target area for site search north of I-85 and east of I-77 between Alexander and Martin middle schools.

This school is viewed at least in part as a facility that would serve to replace the existing Davidson I.B. middle school, which is functionally obsolete. Davidson I.B.'s age (built in 1935), physical condition, building size and site size (5.1 acres) contribute to the fact that it cannot be reasonably brought up to current school codes and standards.

The proposed middle school site is approximately 6.9 miles northeast of Bradley Middle School and lies within the 2003/04 Bradley home school boundary. This middle school is currently 155% utilized without mobile classrooms. Alexander Middle School is also in the general vicinity of the proposed school site, lying 6.1 miles south. Alexander is currently 154% 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 significantly high utilization numbers at Bradley and Alexander middle 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.

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. The proposed property is centered near existing densities of CMS middle school students, as well as near areas of future growth, thus providing for the long-term populating of a school at this site.

It should be noted that this proposed school is to be developed in lieu of the "South Street" middle school site that CMS had previously planned to develop (MR02-42) but subsequently reconsidered when contamination was discovered on the site, and when site accessibility issues could not be resolved. A range of options was considered by CMS for the South Street property, including acquiring only a portion of the site, acquiring adjoining property, and considering its use for an eventual high school site. However, any remaining advantages that the South Street site may have had to serve as a future middle school site were overshadowed by the need to quickly move forward to develop additional middle school space in this portion of the county.

CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED PUBLIC POLICIES:

The RP zoning of the site permits middle schools as long as certain conditions are met with respect to parking, setbacks, and other site design considerations. The site size meets both CMS and state guidelines of developable acres for a 1,200-student middle school.

A middle school is not called for in the northern search zone of the school district's *Long Range School Facilities Master Plan 2001/02 – 2010/11*. However, the *Long Range School Facilities Master Plan 2003/04 – 2012/13* (currently being

contemplated by the CMS Board of Education) prescribes a target area for locating a middle school approximately six miles to the southeast of the proposed site.

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 zoning does allow “civic uses” under prescribed conditions involving parking, setbacks, and other site development considerations. 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 in the Vision Plan at 5 to 10 years.

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 high school) will cause increased traffic around the school site for two 30-minute periods in the morning and afternoon, and during special events. The school district pledges to pay specific attention to traffic impacts as part of its site design, and will work with permitting agencies to minimize this impact.

CMS reports that it will also work with the Town of Cornelius to advocate extending Bailey Road eastward in order to eliminate its status as a dead-end road. Site access is obtained exclusively from the dead-end section of Bailey Road, after it crosses the Norfolk Southern railroad tracks. However, funding for the roadway extension is reportedly to be provided by the private sector as areas further to the east of the site are developed. Although the ¾-mile Bailey Road extension (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 middle school as well as park users. Construction of any additional recreational facilities by the Town will need to be coordinated with CMS site work.

CMUD 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.

The site lies within ½ mile of the Norfolk-Southern rail line, that is the alignment for the future north corridor commuter rail line. As such, occupants of development on this site could be users of the commuter rail, if a station were to be located within reasonable walking proximity. However, a preliminary analysis does not identify the Bailey Road area as having the same potential as a location for a future station as do other areas along the line. The closest potential commuter rail station has been tentatively identified at Caldwell Station that lies approximately one mile to the south of the Bailey/Old Statesville Road intersection. Final station locations should be established within the next 18 to 24 months. If CMS were to commit to this site for a future school, it might influence the final station location.

In late 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 crossing currently has no warning signals or arm gates. The consultant placed a high priority upon improvement of this crossing, and recommended that it be improved with automatic warning devices (gates and flashers), that would cost an estimated \$500,000, although no funding sources or timelines were identified.

ESTIMATED PROJECT COMPLETION DATE:

A total of \$13.3 million of the estimated \$22 million project cost (including construction, furnishings and equipment, design and project management) is already funded. The district is considering a phased development that could involve completion of a first phase of the school as soon as 2005 or 2006, with full completion as funding becomes available.

JOINT USE TASK FORCE REVIEW COMMENTS:

The Joint Use Task Force considered this matter at their October 1, 2003 meeting, and the potential joint use opportunities between CMS and the Cornelius Park and Recreation department sharing development and maintenance responsibilities for recreational facilities for the school was discussed.

CMPC STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends approval of the acquisition of this site for a future middle 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.

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