



WORK SESSION of the Greenbelt City Council held Wednesday, January 29, 2003, for the purpose of meeting with representatives of the Prince George's County School Board.

Mayor Davis started the meeting at 8:07 p.m. It was held in the Multipurpose Room of the Community Center.

PRESENT WERE: Council members Edward V.J. Putens, Rodney M. Roberts, Alan Turnbull, and Mayor Judith F. Davis.

STAFF PRESENT WERE: Michael P. McLaughlin, City Manager; and Kathleen Gallagher, City Clerk.

ALSO PRESENT WERE: Abby Crowley, Robert Duncan, and José Morales, Prince George's County Board of Education; David Lever, Director, Planning and Architectural Services, Prince George's County Public Schools; Leta Mach, Alla Lake, and Jeffrey Morissette, Advisory Committee on Education (ACE); Donna Hathaway Beck and Linda Owens, CB-40 Committee; Maniko Barthelemy, the Gazette; and Mary Moien, Greenbelt News Review.

Following introductions, Mayor Davis gave an overview of Council's stakeholder meetings, and Ms. Mach gave an overview of ACE's mission and programs.

The following topics were discussed:

Renovation of Greenbelt Middle School: Mr. Lever said this project has high priority, and the board is well aware of the problems. He believes the county also agrees in theory, the problem being money. They are still seeking state planning approval, which they hope to receive by May. August 2006 is their best-case target date for completing the project. Council reminded the board of the City's prior promise to partner on restoring the playing fields at the school, since having additional game fields in Greenbelt West is a City need.

Dr. Crowley asked Mr. Lever if the City could take any action that would be helpful. He said an expression of support to the Board of Public Works would be helpful, since they do not usually grant planning approval unless implementation funding will be available the following year. The planning for this project will require enough lead time, however, that the school board would like to have planning approval regardless of expectations for funding for the following year. The Board of Public Works would make its decision in April. The City could also urge the County Executive and County Councilmember Peters to express county support by the third week in March to Dr. Stenzler, director of the Public School Construction Program staff. Council noted it has a stakeholder meeting with the County Executive scheduled for February 19.

Mr. Morales suggested that he and Mr. Lever accompany Council on its tour of the Middle School when that occurs.

Location of Greenbelt in Developed Tier: Mr. McLaughlin distributed copies of a memo from Celia Craze, Director, Planning and Community Development, indicating that being categorized as "developed" in the M-NCPPC plan would not have an impact. Since there is no undeveloped residentially zoned property in Greenbelt and since Eleanor Roosevelt High School (ERHS) is already overcrowded, the issue is moot. Ms. Beck commented that although there may be no immediate impact within Greenbelt, that is not the case on the larger area.

School Overcrowding: Mayor Davis reported that according to Principal Linda Sherwood, Springhill Lake Elementary is now only slightly over capacity, with the decline being attributed to the departure of families with children from Springhill Lake because of the increased rents.

Dr. Crowley said the board had just rejected boundary changes that would have moved students from ERHS to Duval because 1) they prefer not to move students who are already enrolled, and 2) they believe they should wait to move students until destination schools are made sufficiently competitive and attractive. She said the board believes that overcrowding is largely attributable to transfers, which hurt not only the overcrowded destination school but also the schools students leave behind. She added that the board would like to see an increased focus on strengthening neighborhood schools and making them attractive enough to reduce transfers.

This topic was broadened later in the meeting to include a focus on neighborhood schools not only to decrease transfers but also to encourage parents to consider public rather than private schools for their children. Mr. Duncan suggested that municipalities could perhaps be a vehicle for working with residents to encourage the neighborhood school concept, whereas this would be more difficult in unincorporated areas. He suggested a joint pilot between several cities and the school board to look at neighborhood schools and encourage what Mr. Turnbull dubbed a "homecoming" of families to the public schools. It was suggested that the Four Cities, as an existing coalition, might work well for this. It was noted that the next Four Cities meeting was to focus on education issues, and Greenbelt could request to add this to the agenda.

Dr. Crowley said the addition slated for ERHS will both replace the trailers and also add core facilities. She also noted that the teachers and administrators at ERHS do not consider themselves overcrowded at this point: they want to stay at about 3,000 because of the diversity of faculty and programs that can be supported at that population level.

Mr. Duncan said he was somewhat less optimistic about space issues than Dr. Crowley, since even if all construction in the pipeline were to be approved, there would still not be enough seats because of the "bubble" of student population coming up. Mr. Morales agreed and said the board is also exploring ways to do construction cheaper and faster.

Ms. Mach commented on problems created in the past, for example at Springhill Lake, when new construction was designed for current needs but not for growth.

School Transportation: Mayor Davis recounted the problems of the families in University Square, including 32 children, who do not have bus service but believe themselves to be outside the 1.5 mile walking radius of Greenbelt Elementary School. Mr. Morales said he had personally checked the mileage twice and found it to be slightly under 1.5 miles. There was discussion of the potential dangers involved today with young children walking to school. Dr. Crowley said the board was not unsympathetic to this but that money was a real issue. Mr. Duncan added that Prince George's is spending 30-40% more per pupil on transportation than any other county in the state. In part, he said, a culture was created in the county by its busing heritage that made families expect full transportation. Dr. Crowley gave as an example the fact that in Montgomery County, there is no busing for magnet schools, while when "cluster" transportation was suggested for magnet schools in Prince George's, parents loudly protested the reduction in service.

Mr. Turnbull suggested looking into a program called Safe Routes to School, which has pilot programs in Montgomery and Baltimore Counties. Mr. Morissette commented that since at least center-city Greenbelt is fortunate to have good sidewalks and a safe environment, the City should focus on ways to encourage residents to find acceptable ways to walk to Greenbelt Elementary. Ms. Mach said ACE would raise the issue at their upcoming meeting with representative of the PTAs.

Magnet Schools: Pupil assignment must now be race-neutral, and the board is working on a design. There are budget problems, however, because the state claims the previous magnet school funding has been folded into the Thornton funding, but in fact this is a loss. Mr. Duncan encouraged the City to lobby its delegation for a one-year extension of magnet schools funding. Council agreed to place the item on the list for the mid-term legislative dinner. Dr. Crowley added that TAG money is being treated in the same way.

The stakeholder meeting ended at 10:00 p.m. Mr. Putens also left at this time.

Other Business

Mayor Davis distributed information from MML on proposed cuts in state funding to municipalities.

It was agreed that the executive session planned to follow the stakeholder meeting would be rescheduled when all members of Council could attend.

Mr. McLaughlin announced that County Executive Johnson accepted the City's invitation to come early to the February 26 stakeholder meeting in order to receive an orientation to the Greenbelt CARES program. He distributed copies of Mr. Johnson's legislative agenda, Council's legislative agenda, and a list of City-interest items recently discussed with County Councilmember Peters' legislative aide, Ric Santos. He noted the overlap of interests between the County Executive and Council and offered to draft a meeting agenda using that framework. Among items to consider would be the items that were mentioned at tonight's meeting that need county attention, county Fire Departments, municipal planning and zoning authority, the Inter-County Connector, overturning CB-40, and maybe COG dues.

The meeting ended at 10:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Kathleen Gallagher