

# Breach the Wall of Separation

by Elaine Cogan

In too many communities, good planning stops at the school door. For example, there may be a dire need for a new library or recreation space but no funds to pay for them. Even if they already exist in a near-by school, that facility closes at 4 p.m., is not open on weekends, or is generally unavailable to the broader community. School boards may wrestle with the challenges of dealing with some schools that are overcrowded and others that are under-utilized, while planners unilaterally ponder housing policies that will affect the future demographics of these same schools. Moreover, the governing bodies are most often separate, with different elected boards and sources of revenue.

While there may have been good reasons historically for such divisions of responsibility, this is less defensible in an era of growing needs, finite resources, and a citizenry that expects cooperation and collaboration among various governmental bodies.

The challenge for enlightened planning commissioners is how to bridge that divide without dividing the community. For example, it probably would be more controversial than it would be worth to propose an actual merger of your all-

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purpose, civic government with the schools. But short of that, there are many constructive steps you can take.

Has the planning board ever met with the school board? Do your planners work with school staff on issues that concern you both, or do you have a respectful but arms length relationship? Are you privy to their plans for new schools or playgrounds? Do you inform them of prospective plans that may affect them? If school officials need a zoning or comprehensive plan change, do they involve you in the pre-proposal stage? Does anyone consider community needs that could be satisfied better by joint planning?

One example is transportation. This is an ongoing issue in most communities as planners ponder how to accommodate the auto while making it easier for others to get around on foot or by bike. Will the next new school be built in an area that is accessible for children walking or bicycling? Can arrangements be made for the teachers parking lot to be used by the community when the school is closed?

Few communities have sufficient libraries, parks and recreational facilities, meeting places for seniors and other community groups, and auditoriums for cultural events. Yet, the schools remodel and build new all the time, often, as noted above, with such facilities that are not available for community use. Joint use and/or co-ownership to share costs and resources can benefit all.

Your planning board is an ideal body to take on the challenge of initiating community dialogue with school officials. Invite the school board to an informal get acquainted session. Make it clear you honor their leadership in developing and carrying out the community's educational agenda while stressing your responsibility to plan for the entire city's welfare.

Show them your plans in process and invite their comments. Ask them about their short and long-range facility and property needs. Talk about common issues and concerns and how they can be solved in a cooperative, cost-effective fashion. After laying the groundwork, choose one project on which you can act jointly and direct your staffs to do everything possible to make it a success.

The most effective planning boards continually demonstrate their understanding that the community is served best if its individual components work as an interdependent whole rather than a series of unrelated parts. You will reach an enviable milestone if you breach the wall of separation that too often stands between community planning and the schools. ♦

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## On-Line Comments

"School districts and governmental planning units need a good two-way line of communication on job growth, 'recycling' plans for more mature neighborhoods, and long-term projections (such as how much development we will have). Schools and other agencies have to realize that we are in a mutual cause-and-effect relationship."

— Dr. John Crawford, Executive Director for Planning, Evaluation, and Information Services, Millard Public School District, Omaha, Nebraska