

BEST PRACTICES FOR SITE SELECTION AND PLANNING

PURPOSE

This publication is provided for the use of Districts and their design professional as a basis for discussion for selection of potential school sites and the planning of site features.

BACKGROUND

Many factors are involved in the selection of a suitable site for a new school, the addition to an existing school or the selection of space for lease. Access to the site, traffic impact on the surrounding community and cost to develop or improve the site can have significant financial consequences if not addressed early in the planning process.

In accordance with State statute, the Office of School Facilities (OSF) is required to approve school sites, whether a land gift, swap or purchase or the lease of land or buildings. The OSF is available to provide assistance to the Districts when evaluating potential sites for improvement, lease or acquisition. There are additional resources to assist Districts in selecting sites such as recommendations from the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI).

As with the building themselves, South Carolina is in a period of transition with Districts seeking to provide a diversity of educational opportunities to their students when considering the location and planning for school sites. The Office of School Facilities (OSF) supports the Districts' efforts by providing guidelines in the *South Carolina School Facilities Planning and Construction Guide* that are flexible and responsive. As a supplement to the *Guide*, OSF provides provide Districts and design professionals best practice informational tools such as this publication.

SELECTING A SITE

Site Review

The OSF will visit the site with a representative of the school district, a representative from the Department of Transportation and the design professional if available, to determine factors that will make the site suitable or unsuitable for use as a school. When requesting consideration for a site, the District should furnish a boundary map of the property with any applicable wetlands or flood zones shown. The site visit will be documented on the *Form F2A Evaluation for Approval for Site Acquisition* and sent to the District. In addition to DOT, the OSF may request the input of other state and local agencies to take into consideration all natural and/or man-made features that may influence the final decision to approve a site.

Other site selection factors to be considered are:

Natural and man-made features

Features present on the site may limit use of the site or have a significant cost impact on the project budget. Natural features such as wetlands and waterways limit the area available for development. The presence of floodways or a flood plain may either limit the area available for development or will have a cost impact to meet state and local code requirements or both.

High voltage electric transmission lines have an associated easement that restricts development and is generally perceived to have a potential negative effect on health by a large segment of the general public. If transmission lines are present on the site, the following setbacks from the easement are recommended for siting a structure:

- **Kilovolt Designation Setback**
- 100-115 kV 100 Feet
- 220-235 kV 150 Feet
- 345 kV 250 Feet

Natural gas and propane transmission pipelines also have easement issues and may present a potential safety hazard. These pipelines are maintained at high pressures and, in the event of a leak, could release a significant amount of flammable gas. Natural gas is lighter than air and will tend to rise but may have sufficient gas concentration to be an explosion risk. Propane is heavier than air and will tend to collect in low pockets to create an explosion risk.

On a site where a septic tank system is planned, the District must receive preliminary approval from DHEC Division of Onsite Wastewater Management before submitting an application to the OSF for approval to acquire the property.

Local Government Comprehensive Planning and Zoning

Districts are required by South Carolina Code Ann. §6-29-540 (supp.1999) to comply with local zoning ordinances and to consult with the local planning commission as to the compatibility of the proposed school site with the comprehensive plan of the community. If the local planning commission finds the proposal to be in conflict with the comprehensive plan, the school district may proceed with the project as long as the district publicly states its intention to proceed and the reason. A copy of this finding must be sent to the local governing body, the local planning commission, and published as a public notice in a newspaper of general circulation. However, it is generally recommended that the District work to resolve any objections and receive planning commission approval in the interests of community harmony.

The ability to override the rejection of the planning commission is limited to siting the school. Other zoning regulations that would normally be applied had the zoning been approved would remain in place and the District would be obligated to comply with requirements as they apply to items such as signage, setback distances, building height or area restrictions, architectural and material requirements, landscaping and parking.

Traffic Management and Parking

The District is responsible for mitigating any traffic issues that may arise on the adjacent roads due to the school operation. This responsibility applies to new construction as well as any addition or renovation to an existing school that will add students and/or change existing parking or traffic patterns on the site. All site issues or changes pertaining to access, stacking, traffic patterns and parking require review and approval from DOT. All site issues or changes pertaining to bus access, stacking and parking require review and approval by the Department of Education Transportation Division in addition to DOT. All site issues or changes pertaining to fire department and emergency vehicle access require review and approval by OSF and the local fire official in addition to DOT.

The prospective site must have road frontage of sufficient length to allow for separate car and bus entrances and exits and of a size sufficient to site the building, allow for adequate parking and allow for safe and adequate car stacking on the property. Unless otherwise approved by DOT and/or the appropriate city/county authority, the property must meet the requirements of Chapter 4: “School Access Design” in the *2008 Access and Roadside Management Standards* as published by the South Carolina Department of Transportation (DOT) Traffic Engineering Division. These requirements detail minimum separation distances from other drives, intersections, blind curves and other road features as well as requirements for the construction of turn lanes. DOT may require a traffic study to be funded by the District to determine the necessity of signal lights or roadway improvements that may be required away from the actual school site. Technical assistance is available from the DOT, Traffic Engineering Division to assist Districts and their design professionals.

Parking is determined by local zoning ordinance. In the absence of a local zoning ordinance, districts may use either the ICC Building or Zoning Code to determine requirements. In not case may the parking be less that that approved by DOT.

Managing traffic flow is important for the smooth and safe operation of the school. The following should be considered when planning a site:

- Pedestrians and bicyclists must have a designated safe path between the adjacent road, parking areas and the school building that avoids crossing vehicle and bus loops.
- Vehicle and bus loops should operate in a one-way counterclockwise direction or in a manner that assures that the loading/unloading of students occurs from the right hand side of the vehicle adjacent to the building. This maintains the safety of the student by preventing the need to cross in front of and between cars during loading and unloading;
- Although vehicles waiting for loading and unloading may form more than one parallel line, it is recommended that vehicles merge into a single line for loading and unloading. This maintains the safety of the students by preventing the need for some students to cross in front of and between a line of cars for loading and unloading in the second line.
- A separate area is recommended for younger children in safety and booster seats to allow for the increased loading and unloading time required with the seats without impacting the flow of older students.
- On-site school bus traffic should be physically separated from visitor, parent, and student traffic to prevent route delays for the next set of students.
- Student parking areas should be separated from staff/visitor/bus parking and student loading/unloading areas to maintain traffic flow and prevent delays.

Bus parking and circulation must be planned so that busses do not back-up on school sites. Busses have limited visibility and the chance of an accident during backing a bus is significant. Each parking stall for a full sized bus shall be a minimum of 15 feet wide. Smaller spaces may be provided for mini busses and other specially sized vehicles used to transport students after consultation and approval from the Department of Education Transportation Division.

The District is responsible for any and all costs associated with roadway improvements including, but not limited to permits, underground and above ground utility relocation and roadway construction, Preliminary cost estimates for roadway improvements are recommended to be prepared by the district prior to the site acquisition for inclusion in the project budget. All

site improvement plans and applications for encroachment permit must be submitted to and approved by DOT Traffic Engineering Division prior to bidding the project.

SITE APPROVAL

If the District elects to proceed with site acquisition after initial of the site visit with the OSF and DOT, the District will be responsible for obtaining the following additional information to submit with the *Form F2 Application for Approval of Property Acquisition*:

- Current zoning status;
- Utility information;
- Certified plat including applicable wetlands and flood plain information;
- Phase 1 Environmental Report;
- Phase 2 Environmental Report, if required;
- Topographical map, if available; and
- Geotechnical Report, if available.

The environmental reports provide information on the past use of the site that may identify potential obstacles to developing the site such as soil contamination, landfill activity and ground water contamination and the geotechnical report may identify rock or unsuitable soil that could have a significant impact on the project budget.

Leases for land and/or structures are recommended to be negotiated for a minimum sufficient time to properly depreciate any capital improvements the District proposes. Leases for transitional facilities and relocatable classrooms will be allowed on request by the District with a justification for the leasing plan.

MODIFYING AN EXISTING SITE

The same consideration is required for modification of an existing site as selecting and planning for a new site except for the application for approval to purchase. Dealing with existing conditions that may limit design considerations, submitting for and receiving necessary approvals and permits for design before work starts and inspections when work is complete are required in a manner similar to new construction. The OSF and DOT will conduct site reviews and provide technical assistance to Districts for renovations project on request to assist with planning and the OSF will review plans for all site renovation work.

An existing site may contain internal roads on the State Highway System. Consultation with DOT will help identify these roads. Before modification on these roads can start, these roads must be removed from the state system. Although there is no charge associated with this action, it may have an impact on the construction schedule, especially for work to be completed over the summer break.

PROPERTY DISPOSAL

In accordance with §59-19-190, the reassignment or disposal of property, land and/or buildings, purchased with any state funds after 1952 requires approval of the State Board of Education prior to reassignment, transfer or disposal. Requests to the Board for disposition of such parcels shall

be made through the OSF in accordance with the *South Carolina School Facilities Planning and Construction Guide*.

Parcel(s) may contain internal roads identified as being on the State Highway System regardless of purchase date. These are roads that are owned and maintained by the DOT and will require DOT to remove the road(s) from the system prior to the disposal of the property. Providing a boundary survey (if available) of the parcel with the disposition request to the OSF will aid the DOT in determining if any road(s) are on the State Highway System.