

November 2, 2015

Dr. Patrick Murphy
Superintendent
Arlington Public Schools
1426 26th Street, North
Arlington, Virginia 22207

Dear Dr. Murphy,

I am pleased to provide additional information to you and School Board members on behalf of the Building Level Planning Committee (BLPC) for the new school building on Wilson Boulevard. Our committee previously provided feedback to you in an August 6 letter. This second letter builds on the committee's earlier endorsement of the Fanning Bars concept design for the Wilson Project and provides additional information on the committee's work to date, parking options, shared spaces for the co-located programs, and ideas around reducing costs.

Clearly, the overall projected cost of the project is a concern. The BLPC has worked with your staff to understand the costs associated with the building and options for cost reduction. However, throughout our discussions in the last two months, we have kept in mind that the greatest cost increase for this project was not precipitated by the decision of any architect, educator, community, staff or BLPC member. The single greatest pressure on this project is the unexpected rise in construction costs across the region. The significant rise in building expenses accounts for more than \$9 million in the projected cost — an amount over which no one has control.

Our work to date: Concept Design

In 2014, the School Board determined that the new Wilson facility will serve 775 students enrolled in the H-B Woodlawn (HBW) Program and the Stratford Program, as well as other smaller school initiatives currently co-located on Vacation Lane. As part of its charge, the Wilson BLPC assists the Board and APS by providing diverse perspectives on the building's design. Guided by APS staff and consultants, the BLPC includes members appointed by the School Board, including stakeholders and staff from Stratford and HBW, as well as representation from the Rosslyn neighborhoods and the APS Facilities Advisory Council. The public meetings and discussions with our group have been engaging, cordial, and productive.

Our BLPC work began in April, and our first charge was to produce a concept design for the project. The concept design involved selecting an overall shape for the building, organizing the Wilson Boulevard site with placement of the building and related amenities (i.e., field, parking), and planning for transportation (bus and car drop off areas, parking and public transport options). In addition to work on the building concept design, Stratford and HBW staff and administrators (and some students) have partnered with the architects to develop some *preliminary* thinking on the internal organization of the building spaces (library, cafeteria, classrooms, etc.), areas that won't be fully realized until the schematic design phase.

While the BLPC has been keenly aware that the overall allocation for this project was \$80.2 million, during the concept design phase, the BLPC has had only limited information and guidance about the individual costs of various components of the design. We understand that this practice is the expectation during concept design and that we will have more cost information during schematic design. That said, in light of the updated estimates that indicate that the cost of the concept presented in August will exceed \$100 million, the BLPC has worked to reduce and refine the overall square footage of the building, and we have made some suggestions (see below) to address the need to contain costs for the project.

Fanning Bars is the best choice

The BLPC wishes to reiterate its endorsement for the Fanning Bars design concept. Earlier this year, the group spent more than six weeks reviewing a number of design shapes. Factors that strongly influenced the selection of the Fanning Bars include:

- Optimal solar exposure on every level with natural light for all classrooms
- A compact structure with central staircases, reducing travel time between building areas and encouraging activity and movement within the school
- Access to secure, outside open space for students on *every* level — a critical element for the HBW open campus in this urban setting
- Internal “visual” connections between each *floor*, increasing opportunities for both interaction and supervision
- Large, accessible ground floor and first floor areas for all students
- Access for community amenities on the first “Bar” (terrace)
- An overall height of only five stories above grade

As part of the discussions about cost reductions, the School Board instructed staff to explore any cost savings precipitated by simplifying the building design. While the BLPC did consider a “Box” option in October (with an estimated cost reduction of \$2.5 million), I would be remiss in not pointing out that we reviewed only a single drawing for this concept. A full investigation for the Box, should the School Board wish to pursue this direction, will require additional time.

That said, I will share that our preliminary discussion uncovered a number of concerns with the Box in comparison to Fanning Bars, especially around the increased height of the building. All educators felt that movement within the seven-story Box would be more dependent on a larger number of elevators, while most students in Fanning Bars would use the stairs. Stratford staff expressed concerns about the increased height related to some students’ ability to navigate the space, especially in an emergency evacuation. Community members similarly favored a building that is in scale with lower buildings nearby. Unlike Fanning Bars, the stacked structure of the Box isolates each floor, limiting community connections among the programs, students, and staff within the building. Also, the orientation of the building on the site would likely reduce solar exposure inside the classrooms and on the field. While the Box does have open space elements on one level of the roof, there would be limited access to this area from the field or from other levels in the building.

But at its core, the Fanning Bars concept offers something the Box cannot deliver: a focal point for western Rosslyn and a highly visible centerpiece of Arlington’s civic pride for years to come. The inspiring design for the building’s exterior suggests curiosity, openness, community, and

innovation, offering maximum potential to create a stimulating educational environment within this visually rich space. The school and related amenities offer to our entire community of neighbors, students, teachers, local workers, as well as Arlington, at large, a positive and engaging contribution to our urban landscape, and promises to enhance the lives of those who learn and work inside its walls.

Wilson offers shared spaces for all

While the Stratford and HBW programs are distinct educational programs, students and staff from the two programs have benefited from their long-term association on Vacation Lane. Today, the construction of the new Wilson facility presents an opportunity to create a unique communal learning environment, while recognizing the specific needs of each program.

Maximizing the number of common spaces for the two programs has been a central focus of our discussions since the BLPC first convened in April. Shared spaces likely present some square footage savings for the project, but the synergy created by sharing common work, play, and learning spaces is the central benefit of this strategy.

We recently learned that APS will be providing the BLPC with additional expertise and guidance related to adaptable and universal design to help us understand and endorse aspects of the building that enable all students to interact and learn. We welcome this additional input from experts in special education.

The two program principals, along with students and staff, have worked to propose a number of communal spaces for the new building where students from both programs will socialize, learn, and interact on a daily basis. Altogether, the architect estimates that 13,000 square feet within the building will be shared spaces. While the BLPC has only reviewed *preliminary* internal drawings (in anticipation of the schematic design phase to come), the group has endorsed plans to share the following spaces:

- School bus arrival lane and parent drop off areas
- Entrances, lobbies, and hallway/common areas
- Athletic field, “Bar” terraces, and “sunken” gardens/triangle courtyards
- Gym and other spaces for physical education and related services
- Cafeteria and food preparation areas
- School clinic
- Library and media center
- Teacher and staff work areas, including offices for related service providers
- Auditorium and black box theater

There has been some discussion around eliminating the black box theatre as a cost saving strategy. As instructional space, the black box is a centerpiece of student-directed learning at HBW. More than 200 HBW students participate in theatrical productions and film-making every year. The existing black box is used for no less than 9 student-led productions annually including plays, musicals, and theatrical reviews (averaging one show per month). Of course with rehearsal time, the black box is fully booked all year, while the main stage boasts an additional 16 theater and music performances. Unlike the Vacation Lane black box, which is a repurposed 1950s-era fallout shelter, the Wilson black box will be designed primarily as a flexible theater space with accessibility for all students in both programs. The BLPC endorses the inclusion of a black box theater on Wilson.

Some spaces are adaptable, some are small

In addition to sharing spaces between the two co-located programs, the School Board has indicated that it wishes the building to be designed “for an optimal learning environment that is flexible...” As we begin the schematic design phase for this project, the BLPC hopes to see the architect team suggest design options for instructional spaces that are both agile and versatile, benefitting from lessons learned in recent projects at W-L and Discovery.

However, a number of spaces for the Stratford program will, by instructional necessity, be highly-specialized, requiring modifications and equipment. Also, some school spaces will likely be smaller or with fewer amenities than is typical of other APS secondary schools. For example, the shared cafeteria is much smaller than would be typical for 775 students and the gym lacks locker and shower facilities; the building has a number of smaller classrooms. Since the original concept cost estimates were released in August, staff have targeted overall reductions of more than 3,000 square feet in the building for a cost savings of some \$1 million. APS should be mindful that, in reducing the square footage in the building, we may sacrifice its flexibility for other uses in the future.

Teachers and staff require parking, as do families

The Wilson project’s urban site presents a major shift for APS. Like a few other APS schools (e.g., Key, W-L, Tuckahoe) the site has good access to public transportation. With continued generous TDM incentives, we expect the school community, over time, to adopt greater use of Metrorail, Metrobus, carpools, and biking, in addition to the use of APS school buses.

But we urge the school board to be mindful that free parking that is both convenient and dependable is a necessary and expected amenity for our school communities, for teachers and staff — especially — but also for parents and visitors. Parking is an important benefit to consider for teacher and staff recruitment and retention, which should be a serious concern when a school moves to a new location. APS will want to consider developing a menu of incentives, including free parking and TDM payments, to ensure that HBW and Stratford teachers and staff are eager to move to the new facility.

Coming from all corners of the county, few Stratford and HBW families will live within the walk zone for their school. So parent and visitor parking (particularly after school) will be an essential element to build community. Lack of free and accessible parking may negatively influence family involvement in the education of young people by limiting attendance at Back to School Night, concerts and performances, IEP meetings, and parent-teacher-student conferences (called “Portfolio Night” at HBW).

All agree that on-site parking at Wilson presents serious challenges. While not all APS schools have adequate on-site parking, most have options for free street parking in surrounding neighborhoods for teachers, staff, visitors, and student drivers. Our transportation consultants demonstrated that free daytime parking options in the Wilson neighborhood, at scale, are non-existent.

Current on-site parking on Vacation Lane includes 147 parking spaces, plus generous neighborhood parking. With increases in enrollment, the number of teachers and staff at Wilson will number some 150 people, and parking requirements for major evening events will likely

require upwards of 250 spaces for visitors. It is important to note that providing parking for the HBW and Stratford programs also helps APS be a good neighbor within the Rosslyn community. While the BLPC members, as well as the Stratford and HBW communities, are strongly committed to using TDM-supported options for public transport and alternative transportation (at a rate that will likely grow over time), we do not want the lack of dependable, free parking to be a barrier either to our teachers nor to families visiting the school.

Given the parking challenges presented at the Wilson site, the BLPC strongly endorses action by the School Board to grant additional resources to help resolve this problem— starting with providing dependable, free, on-site or conveniently-located, off-site parking for teachers and staff. Also APS should resolve to find solutions to provide free parking options for families and visitors, perhaps through a system of parking validation.

The Fanning Bars concept includes an on-site parking structure of 92 spaces. This garage increases the overall project cost by more than \$7 million. The BLPC strongly encourages APS and the School Board to explore funding *alternatives* for Wilson parking — either by constructing a larger on-site garage in partnership with a commercial entity or by making a firm, long-term commitment to leasing the prescribed number of parking places in nearby garages. Staff presented both of these alternatives as offering significant cost-savings for the project and noted that the parking issues can be resolved in the next phase of design.

Community amenities and engagement are integral

We are fortunate to have a number of BLPC members representing the surrounding neighborhood. They have shared diverse perspectives on how the new school facility, as well as teachers and students, can be integrated into the community, and what amenities will benefit both students and neighbors. The immediate neighborhood lacks many of the amenities offered by the Wilson project. Some community assets at the site are evident, such as the athletic field, but others include:

- Rich program of arts programming and performances, open to the community
- Choral room and band room where community musical groups may rehearse
- Auditorium for summer performances and gatherings
- Full size gym and other spaces for community sports
- Spaces where young people may attend summer camps
- Sports courts and open space on the first Bar, in addition to the athletic field
- Library and other meeting areas for public use
- Inviting public streetscape, gardens, and plantings near the school
- Additional parking in the garage (if built)

Another community element requiring BLPC input is the creation of an engaging way to interpret and recognize the historic significance of the former Wilson School. Having some additional County funds designated for this purpose will enable stakeholders to envision a fitting tribute to the historic school on this site.

We encourage you and School Board members to work with your County Board counterparts in leveraging additional funds to support these needed community assets.

Getting across the finish line

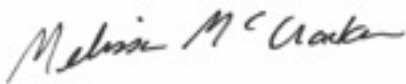
All information available to the BLPC indicates that \$80.2 million will be insufficient to construct adequate facilities for Stratford and HBW. At our last meeting, we reviewed a summary of reductions in square-footage and simplified design elements (Box design), to thoroughly determine what could be accomplished at the site for \$80.2 million. The newly presented design summary proposed the Box design with a significant reduction in the size of the facility, including *fewer square feet* per student than the current HBW/Stratford building (without taking into account the four trailers currently at that site). With only 146,000 square feet proposed for the new building, the site could not support 775 students, at least not without the addition of eight or more trailers on the athletic field.

The BLPC has worked to recommend significant cost reductions for this project. To date, we have endorsed costs savings of some \$8 million through targeted reduced square footage in the building and encouraging alternatives to the APS-funded parking garage. Our recommendations squeeze the current project shortfall, while not sacrificing the needs of the programs.

Facilities staff has indicated that additional funds may be available from other APS sources, as well as County funds for community amenities. The BLPC encourages staff and the School Board to vigorously pursue all options for alternative funding, as well as public-private partnerships for the parking garage.

You can count on a firm commitment from the BLPC that as we receive additional cost proposals during the schematic design phase, we will carefully evaluate every dollar for this project and will work to maximize both shared spaces and inclusive universal design in the building. We respectfully request that the School Board approve the Fanning Bars concept with sufficient funding to enable the building to be constructed with adequate facilities for the Stratford Program and the H-B Woodlawn Program with an opening date of September 2019, when we will all welcome 775 students to their new school.

Sincerely,



Melissa McCracken
Chair, Building Level Planning Committee
Wilson Project