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The Master Planner

Given the cost of facilities, who you choose on the front end could save your back end

Your district is growing and has to catch up. Three new elementary schools are needed, and the superintendent wants to hire an architect so a budget can be developed in time for a spring referendum. The time to start is now.

Sound familiar? Probably.

Planning major construction programs often begins this way, with a call to hurry based on unproven assumptions. The outcome often involves huge wasted expenditures, needlessly repetitive rezoning, and the defeat of bond referendums. Some people may vote to spend little on public education, but my experience is that well-planned construction programs tend to be well received.

Who does facilities master planning in your district now? Consultants on a one-shot contract? Your facilities manager? Architect? Nobody? Do you know?

Your buildings eat up most of your budget—next to personnel—so how are expensive construction decisions made? What goes wrong? How can you avoid costly mistakes that undermine the budget and hurt public support?

Let's examine how you can plan the right way and with the right people.

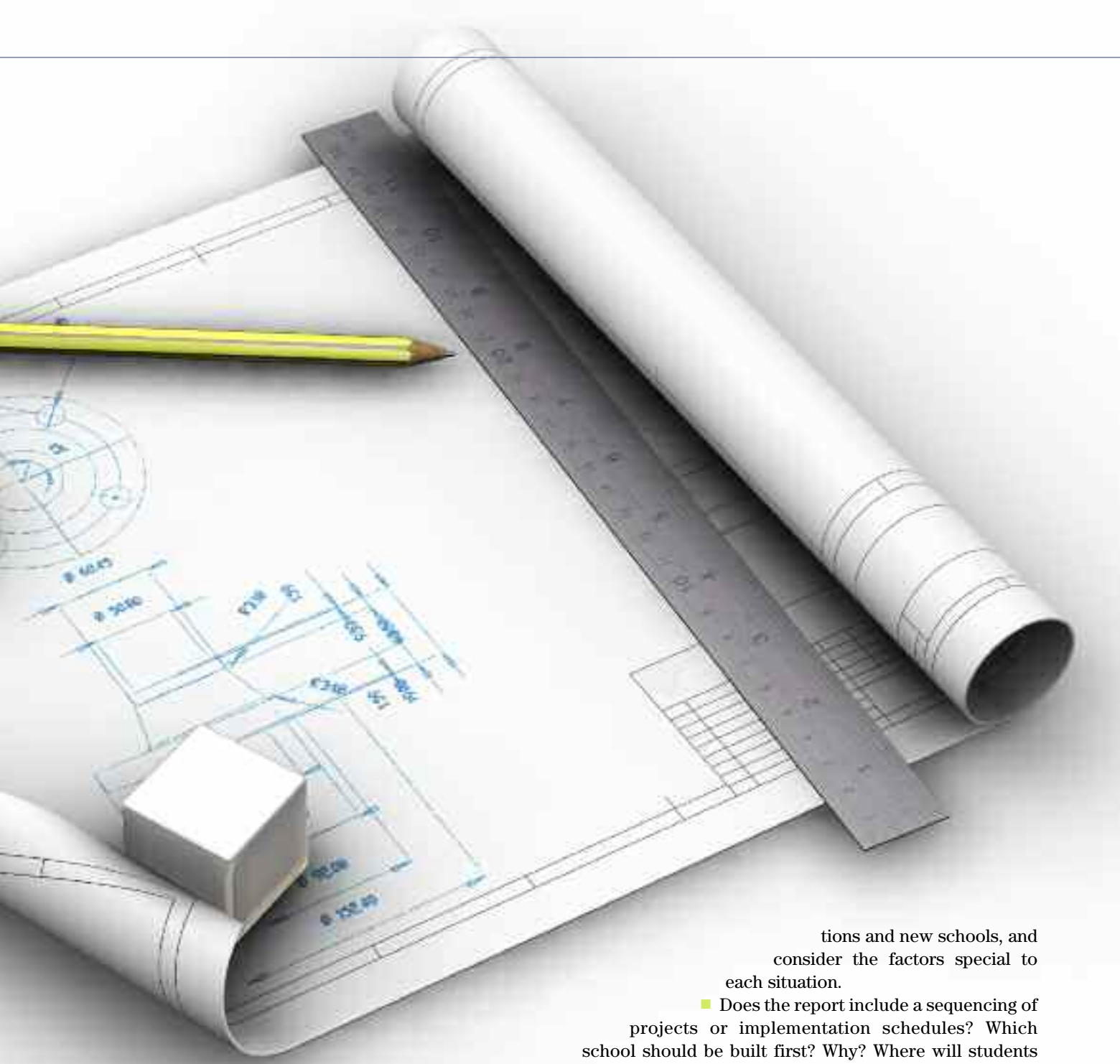
Using consultants

What happens when you mismanage a consultant's role? Does your board go through the motions when it's a given whom the administration will pick? What do planning consultants provide? You sent the request for proposal (RFP), so what did you ask for?

Planning consultants are great presenters with big resumes, eye-catching PowerPoints, and generalizations. They get the contract, then someone else gathers data, holds information gathering meetings with the public, has some "what we dare to dream" meetings, visits schools, talks to staff, and produces a fat report that leaves you scratching your head.

No matter what you are seeking, you must examine at least a couple of the past planning reports the consultant prepared. Here are a few things to look out for in reviewing those reports:

- Are enrollment projections just districtwide numbers plotted on a straight line—more often than not increasing—without an explanation of how they were developed? How did they pan out? Where are the school-by-school projections—by grade for at least five years—that are critical to planning? How are projections related to the recommended building program?
- Does the report have pictures of school buildings that anyone could take? If so, these are colorful and expensive filler that's essentially useless.
- Is the report missing essential details about existing renovation and modification needs, project costs, and scheduling? Develop cost breakdowns for fixing what you already have—it's a critical first step. Otherwise, you can't



fairly evaluate alternatives like closures, additions, or new schools.

- Are alternative solutions included in the report? Each school is part of a network. Deciding whether to close, expand, renovate extensively, or build new requires you to look at the district's schools as one organization. Without alternatives, you open a plan to justified public argument and lack of support.
- Is an impact assessment available with various cost projections for each option? Not having this assessment is a red flag. Your planning report should consider impacts such as rezoning, respect for neighborhoods, travel times, and cost efficiencies. Compare that to the impacts of additions and new schools, and consider the factors special to each situation.
- Does the report include a sequencing of projects or implementation schedules? Which school should be built first? Why? Where will students go during a major renovation? Does the construction calendar—if there is one—include a sequence explaining whether students will be rezoned more than once at that school level? Does it include contingency plans for eliminating portables and getting out of unsafe buildings first?
- Does the "plan" call for more studies or lack details? Does it call for 10 more classrooms at a site without showing where they could be built? Your facilities plan should include all issues from start to finish so you will know what's needed to gain public support. It should reflect intensive discussion in-house among program directors, demographics and facilities experts, and top management about how you will solve documented issues. Perhaps the solution will be reached in stages, but you should have start and

end dates as well as deadlines to complete each stage.

- Did the district have meaningful public participation throughout the process, not hearings after the plan was done? Were study groups utilized? Did you have public meetings to listen to perceived needs? Were public comments actually considered? How does your final plan reflect this?
- In general, does the report present reams of community, facilities, and demographics data that are not clearly tied to analysis and recommendations?
- Could you take the plan in hand, read it carefully, and know what to do next—with an understanding of the logical next steps? Can you explain all that to others?

Using an architect

For some districts, the facilities plan is really a five-year program produced by the architect who designs your schools. Like using a planning consultant, this option shares many of the same pitfalls and adds some other issues. Calling on the same local architect year after year can lead to piecemeal work, in part because local architects rarely do school planning outside the district. As a result, they site adapt the same designs without reviewing performance, or plan for one or two projects without looking at the whole district.

For architectural firms, preparing a master plan is simply a prelude to the big bucks they will get from designing projects and managing construction. Planning is not independent, creating an inherent conflict.

Architects usually are directed to plan specific projects, like new roofs, classroom additions, or the design of a new school of some arbitrary size. This is not master planning; it's putting a time frame to a preexisting project schedule that is based on assumptions, not fact.

This critical defect is fairly easy to spot in the architect's report. The "planning" document begins with a lot of generalizations about community development, industrial growth, and land use plans. Maps show schools, land zoning, utility lines, and road networks. It all sounds related to the issues, but totally lacks a connection that justifies the attached building program.

After this window dressing, the report takes a leap of logic to a recommended list of projects and cost estimates. Clearly, there is a compelling interest to start designing and supervising new projects. That is what architects do, after all.

Using your facilities director

Your district's facilities director is responsible for a huge investment in school buildings and sites. The facilities director knows much about what has been done or talked about and may do a great job with limited funding and staff.

Does experience directly connect to developing a comprehensive program, demographics, and facilities plan in the community context? It's an essential resource to the comprehensive planning team, but not sufficient expertise for planning across the district.

In this context, planning is a specialization that requires technical underpinning and broad experience in preparing a multidisciplinary plan with a school district. Boards often believe the facilities manager knows how to prepare such a plan, but this is not fair. The facilities manager can't be expected to prepare an RFP, screen consultants, or avoid the usual poor planning.

How can comprehensive planning go awry when it's done this way?

> How can you avoid costly mistakes that undermine the budget and hurt public support?

Teamwork may not be emphasized because staff training, experience, and authority do not lead to such interfaces. The facilities manager is crossing lines of authority to seek data from other departments and staff, mostly educators, who are at the same or a higher level. This can result in barriers and turf issues.

In some cases, board members bypass the superintendent and lean on the facilities director to push particular projects without regard to their merit. In others, senior staff members cultivate close ties to key board members in order to protect their territory and get their projects approved, instead of working with and through the superintendent. The superintendent must participate and support the planning process, especially in such situations, or the process likely will not overcome such barriers. An open planning process with independent guidance is about the only way to deal with such backroom pressure.

Facilities directors have the primary responsibility for keeping the schools running, safe, and in good shape. This is a full-time job—and it means that comprehensive planning takes a back seat, takes far too long to complete, or ends up being a list of projects that were predetermined as needed.

The rush to conclusions and the absence of a planning team will seem clear when the report to the board is five pages long and is mostly a list of projects with no comprehensive planning documented. Planning morphs into: "This is obviously what we need, and we need to get on with doing it. We don't need a lot of fancy tables and maps to know that."

Is there a better way?

If planning is not formalized, some staff members are

Building Your Master Plan: A General Template

What should a districtwide facilities master plan contain? How should it be set up so it can be updated at least every two or three years by the staff? The following items are general components, but they have to be expanded and adapted to the policies, practices, and needs of each school district in a work plan:

- Generate a demographics analysis of students for the entire district, using at least five years of enrollment data. The data must show student ID, address, grade, and attending school. More data, such as whether the student qualifies for special education services, should be appended as well.
- Use computer mapping to determine where students attend school, and compare that location to where they should attend. If you don't, you can't track enrollment growth and decline by school zones and neighborhoods and develop alternative attendance plans. Every city and county uses computer mapping for land planning and property inventory, but many districts have historically ignored the need to use the technology to get accurate information. Your staff in charge of transportation mapping can plot where kids live with off-the-shelf software.
- Project enrollments by existing zones for five years using a sound cohort survival method.
- Audit the number of classrooms in each school and how each is being used. This can be an eye opener, but the key is to determine how many students each building could hold based on uniform standards, including on accounting of special programs consistently across all schools.
- Involve the curriculum director in evaluating whether each space is being appropriately used. Work with the special education department and the curriculum director to decide how many students require how much space for each program. Rename or modify programs as needed so that consistent educational opportunities and similar student/teacher ratios are offered from school to school. Many other factors are involved in this audit, and specialized schools must be included with special regard to their programs.
- Assemble known needs for major items such as roof, HVAC, and electrical; each school must be visited by an architect experienced in master planning. Document what other needs exist to meet state standards for education and building construction, including security, access, site circulation, sense of arrival, and other items. Couple this physical analysis with the program's space utilization assessments. Determine the cost to do the building renovations and modifications before any additions or new construction to address demographics.
- Develop alternative plans to house all of the projected kids. Explore options for making better use of buildings, reconfiguring attendance boundaries, making additions, and renovating vs. replacing schools—all without preconceived notions of the answers. At least two or three alternative plans, each with five-year projected impacts, are needed to be sure the one you select is cost-effective. In my experience, projected outcomes are seldom considered, resulting in costly adjustments as plans quickly become outdated due to foreseeable demographic trends.
- Bring along board members as the work develops with candid meetings to discuss progress. Senior staff must be on board and meaningfully participate, because they have essential knowledge of deficiencies and needs. Leaving them in the dark is a deadly idea, as it is human nature to assert one's place somehow.
- Have a citizens' review committee in place from the start. It will help in making presentations to the board and in connecting to the communities. Huge public gatherings generally are little more than an exercise replete with outbursts from a vocal few. Certainly, general hearings are very good for discussing progress, challenges, and recommendations, but not for cutting and pasting a plan.
- Develop supporting recommendations to make a plan work, such as a cost analysis of options, staging of implementation, timetables, etc. Often, a facilities plan must be accompanied by many organizational recommendations to make it work well. These might include calls for annual updates in five-year enrollment projections, adoption of a right-size school policy, and coordination between curriculum and facilities to assure the best use of schools. Consider policies about consistent student/teacher ratios, the removal of portable classrooms no longer used, and improved renovations design criteria for security.
- The planning report should grow through the process, with work plans for each step and minireports on subject areas as the planning develops. The long list of structural and organizational recommendations to implement the plan will evolve and need to be discussed with staff. Providing just a final polished report is just not acceptable.

spending a lot of time already doing what they think will pass as planning anyway. It is nature's way to fill a vacuum. They are paid for that time, and the hidden costs mount up as each person or department plans in parallel—when they should plan programs, demographics, and facilities together.

The result is often an incoherent and inequitable use of schools, in which space is wasted and programs are housed differently without good reason. Schools are located without an overall view and additions are made to facilities that should be closed. These are just some examples I see.

Is this planning in the district's best interest? Or is it simply using opinions and faulty, incomplete data in uncoordinated little steps that end up driving very expensive school building and rezoning decisions? This leads to a house built upon sand.

Clearly all this means that the planning team cannot include just a consultant, facilities people, or architects working in isolation. Your effort must be multidisciplinary, and that will be done most effectively with a planning consultant as the moderator and facilitator.

Developing a comprehensive plan that works must include real involvement by curriculum and special education staff, principals, finance and facilities managers, senior administration, and the superintendent. Your superintendent's buy-in is critical; he or she can't stand off to the side and count votes on the board before deciding to get involved. Leadership is essential to get staff to do their part along the way and to assure that management is on the line for the outcome.

Your plan should be supported the most by the people your board has hired to manage the district. It should not be architects with vested interests in projects or by high-powered traveling consultants. Staff can do the data gathering, but district leadership must have ownership.

What a facilitator can do

I cannot repeat this too often: Planning is a process, not a report.

Universities do not teach budding superintendents how to do comprehensive programs, demographics, and facilities planning, so it's appropriate to hire an expert facilitator. However, the facilitator's role is to work with the team to:

- Develop the overall process and work plans
- Provide expertise in enrollment projections methodology and the mapping of kids
- Plan building usage surveys and review the data
- Moderate meaningful public involvement
- Prepare interim reports as the work evolves and other related tasks.

Consultants are not planners. Instead, they should be geared toward teaching your staff how to plan as a multidisciplined team. The consultant should lead the team in developing a clear understanding of actual needs by integrating programs, demographics, and facilities data and related needs that come to the fore. The planning consultant should help the team develop alternative solutions when necessary, using comprehensive planning methodologies and proven experience in this process. The consultant should draft the report and refine it with the planning team.

But, a planning consultant should never be left to just do a plan without an in-house team and strong communications with the superintendent, board, and public. There are too many stories of how this leads to useless products and disarray. Given a good planning process, a successful plan then is all about ownership.

> Planning is a process, not a report

Use an expert to develop the process, the work plans along the way, the data gathering and analysis, and the draft and final reports that result. In the end, the consultant should help ensure that the final report really builds on findings and is understood as it evolves.

Is this a radical departure from how things are often done? Yes, but look at how things are done now in your district. You simply cannot broker out a comprehensive plan. The results will be short lived and expensive, unless the planner insists upon integrating the district leadership into a sound planning process, making sure that all involved and affected have ample opportunity for ownership.

There is a place for a master planning consultant with documented and wide experience in programs, demographics, facilities, equity, and other issues in the context of the community of educators, board members, staff, parents, and the general community.

This general approach is well tested in my more than 30 years of working with districts nationally. It balances expertise, cost, useful outcome, ownership, and other key concerns. The planning process is a framework, requiring extensive experience for a consultant to fill in the details. It comes from a demonstrated need for districts to have in-house ownership of this planning and to not farm out the facilities master planning process.

In these times of scarce funds and much need for public support of public schools, can you afford to do things the same old way, expecting a different outcome? ■

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