

CITY OF NEWTON

IN BOARD OF ALDERMEN

SPECIAL NEWTON NORTH HIGH SCHOOL DESIGN
ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2004

Present: Ald. Vance (Chairman); Ald. Sangiolo, Stewart, Johnson, Schnipper, Salvucci, Albright, and Gentile. Absent: Ald. Coletti. Also present: Ald. Baker, Danberg, Linsky, Harney, and Parker. Present from the School Committee: Anne Larner (Chair), Susie Heyman, Marc Laredo, Reenie Murphy, and Gale Glick. School Superintendent Jeffrey Young was also in attendance.

The meeting was called to order by the chairman at 7:05 p.m. Board of Aldermen President Baker briefly described why he established this committee and what he expects its role in the Newton North process to be. He explained that it was largely the outgrowth of discussions before the Programs and Services Committee about a number of issues pertaining to the development of the educational program for Newton North and the accommodation of that program in a new building at the existing site of Newton North. He stated that he is looking to this committee to work with the School Committee and School Department to identify and address issues of concern in the design of the new building at an early stage so that the kinds of problems that developed in the design and construction of the existing Newton North and that have arisen in the renovation of Newton South can be avoided. Alderman Vance added that the role of this committee is not to displace the work of the Public Facilities, Finance, and Programs and Services Committees in considering and acting on specific docket items pertaining to the Newton North project. Rather, the role of this committee is to obtain from school authorities and other sources at an early stage prior to the filing of such items the necessary information to enable the Board of Aldermen to act promptly and knowledgeably on such items when they arise. He noted that the work of this committee might well result in the filing of some docket items pertaining to the Newton North project.

Alderman Albright then reviewed briefly the history of the Newton North project before the School Committee and the School Department. That history began some 10 years ago when the Parents Advisory Committee on Space studied the projected space needs of Newton's schools, including those of the two high schools. In the spring of 1998 a broad-based task force did further study to identify the programmatic needs of the two high schools. Thereafter a study by outside consultants, Strekalovsky and Hoit looking at space needs and NESDEC looking at enrollment projections, produced eight options for meeting the space needs of the high schools. In 2000 the School Committee adopted Superintendent Young's recommendation for two high schools of approximately equal size and a building plan which included \$39 million for renovation of the existing Newton North building. The Strekalovsky and Hoit study stated that that work could be done in summers and in other hours when school was not in session so that it would not disrupt education at the school or pose safety hazards to the students. Subsequently in

2002 representatives of Turner Construction Company, the construction manager for the Newton South/Newton North renovations project, concluded that it would not be possible to do the planned Newton North renovations without disrupting the educational activities at the school and without posing safety hazards to the students. After the parents were notified of that conclusion in September of 2002 and of the need to move students out of the school during the renovations, a new citizen task force was established to consider new options for Newton North. In May of 2003 a majority of that task force issued a report recommending that an \$89 million “hybrid”, consisting of renovations to the existing building together with substantial new construction, be done at Newton North. A vocal minority of the task force urged that a wholly new school be constructed. A principal concern of those who supported the hybrid was that the state would not provide reimbursement for a new school, although the projected cost of the hybrid was close to the projected cost of a new school. But in November of 2003 the School Committee voted to pursue the new building option and to seek a commitment from the state to provide reimbursement for such a building.

Anne Larner, chair of the School Committee, then picked up the story. She stated that in 2001 Drummey Roseane Anderson, Inc. (DRA), the architect for the high school renovations project, developed and submitted to the state’s Department of Education program specifications for Newton North calling for a building of 450,000 square feet consisting of the current building plus a small addition. Those specifications called for upgrading of a number of program spaces and infrastructure. After the School Committee decided to pursue the option of a new building, the Committee worked with DRA to adapt those prior program specifications to a new building. That exercise called for looking at the space differently, since it was no longer confined by the existing building. The new program specifications were geared to a projected maximum enrollment of 1950 students, a factor that drives a number of assumptions including not only the number of classrooms but also the size of such specialized spaces as the auditorium and the library. Those specifications reflected some major changes in what would take place in a new school, particularly in the area of vocational and technical education. Bringing in an energetic new director of the voc-tech program led to a major review of the needs of that program which, while it did not substantially change the size of the space devoted to the program, did result in changes in the nature of the program within that space. The preliminary program specifications for Newton North that were submitted to the Department of Education (DOE) called for a new building of some 445,000 square feet to accommodate a maximum enrollment of 1950 students.

Thereafter the state responded that enrollment projections justified a Newton North High School designed for an enrollment of no more than 1750 students. After further study the School Committee concluded that the school should accommodate a maximum enrollment of 1850 students with an 85% utilization factor, with the building designed so that it could be expanded to accommodate a larger enrollment if necessary. Earlier this year the state gave its approval for the construction of a new building for Newton North but with lower reimbursement – \$46 million – than Newton had expected. As a result, the School Committee took another look at the program at the new building and cut it back for a maximum enrollment of 1850 rather than 1950 students and shaved other elements such as cutting one science lab and making small reductions in the square footage for such things as toilets. The changes reduced the projected size of the building by some 40,000 square feet consisting of 26,000 square feet in program space and 14,000 square feet of miscellaneous space for such things as toilets. Some program changes

were made, such as moving one piece of the voc-tech program to Newton South, but full programs have been retained at North in areas such as athletics and theatre. Turner Construction has advised the School Committee that its proposed program specifications of square feet per student for Newton North, compared with such specifications of square feet per student for comparable schools for comparable student bodies nationally, are on the generous side.

Anne Larner noted that the design criteria for the new building at North that have been approved by the School Committee call for flexibility to enable the building to respond readily to changing needs in the future and to avoid the problems of the past. The building will not have such things as accordion walls but will have other elements of flexibility and such important elements as high-quality air.

Alderman Gentile pointed out that the \$39 million price tag for the original Newton North renovation program became substantially higher. That basic cost for the renovations themselves was increased by \$5 million before renovation work even began. The total estimated price tag then went up by millions more with the news that it would not be safe to keep the students in the building during the renovations. Thus, there would be substantial additional costs to move students temporarily to schools out of Newton or to put them in temporary buildings on the Newton North site and to bus the athletic teams to other sites for all their competitions.

Alderman Vance then noted that, per the projected timeline for the Newton North project attached to the July 16, 2004, memorandum from Sandy Pooler regarding the funding for Newton North, it would be a number of months before the major decision points for the Board of Aldermen in the process. He pointed out that under that projected timeline an architect would probably not be selected until sometime in the first few months of 2005 so there would be no request to the Board to approve additional design funds until that time. He noted further that it seems unlikely that the necessary design and other work to support a request for bonding of the construction funds would be done until the fall of 2005 so that the Board would be fortunate if it were able to act on such a request prior to the end of its present term in December of 2005. He pointed out that this means that the Board, and this committee in particular, will have a number of months to look at all issues of concern with respect to the project before the Board will be called on to take formal action with respect to it.

Alderman Gentile then asked the School Committee members how comfortable they are with the 1850 figure for the maximum enrollment capacity of the new Newton North. Susie Heyman responded that in the tightest year of the School Committee's enrollment projections the North enrollment would be at 1850 and that at that level the projected building would still be only at an 85% utilization level. The utilization of the current building is at 100% so that 15% utilization margin, together with the flexibility for possible expansion that is to be incorporated into the design of the building, should be adequate even if the School Committee is wrong on its peak enrollment projections.

Anne Larner added that she recalled that in an oral report to the School Committee DRA said that it actually utilized an 80% utilization factor in its specifications for a building to accommodate 1850 students and that at 100% utilization such a building could accommodate

2100 students. Anne will look for the transcript of that meeting at which that report was given and make it available.

Jeff Young added that the highest enrollment project for North in upcoming years is less than 1900 students, well within the enrollment flexibility that is built into the specifications for the building.

Alderman Albright stated that in reviewing the School Committee's design criteria she was disappointed not to see more about program. She asked whether the School Committee and School Department are looking at materials on best practices for making a high school more student-friendly for all students such as through the use of smaller learning communities.

Jeff Young responded that the School Department, supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, has studied the use of smaller learning communities in high schools and, supported by another recent grant, has been studying how to implement measures to make a large high school more intimate. He stated that the research on the subject shows that the need for smaller learning communities in a high school can be effectively addressed by such non-building design measures as administrative and organizational adjustments. He added that the new building is to be designed with sufficient flexibility so that if some building reconfiguration is necessary to facilitate the use of smaller learning communities, it can readily be done.

Alderman Salvucci asked how a building of 60 classrooms to accommodate up to 1850 students could accommodate more students, if required by higher student enrollment, without adversely impacting class size. Jeff Young replied that this could readily be done by adjustments in the scheduling of classes, which is one of the three factors, along with the number of classes and class size, used for optimal building utilization. Alderman Salvucci then asked how the matter of storage space for athletic equipment will be handled. Anne Larner responded that the School Department has a database of space pursuant to which they will determine how to provide for such space. Alderman Salvucci said that he is very concerned about the problem of change orders at Newton South and very much hopes that that problem can be avoided or minimized at Newton North.

Alderman Stewart asked what assumptions had been used with respect to the number of lecture halls – that is, educational spaces that are large enough to accommodate more than one ordinary size class – in the new building. He believes that it is an important part of a high school student's preparation for college, with its many large classes conducted in lecture halls, to have some experience in high school with the lecture-hall format. Jeff Young responded that the number of classrooms needed was determined by the projected maximum 1850 enrollment, desired class size, and projected schedule. He stated that the program specifications do not call for many lecture halls.

Alderman Stewart then stated that he had suggested that President Baker establish this committee to review the process by which the school officials are developing the program specifications for the new Newton North building. He has many questions about the development of those specifications and will submit those questions in writing to the School Department for its consideration. He then asked the school officials about their current thinking

with respect to the matter of parking and parking policy at Newton North. He is interested in the possibility of building a parking garage on the city's Austin Street parking lot near Newton North.

Anne Larner responded that the School Committee has discussed the parking issue but has reached no detailed conclusions with respect to the parking need or the parking solution. The committee is aware of the adverse impact of parking on the surrounding neighborhood and wishes to try to minimize that impact. Unfortunately there is not much space for parking on the school site itself. An underground parking facility is estimated to cost \$50,000-\$60,000 per space to construct. To build an above-ground parking garage would cost \$15,000-\$16,000 per space. Anne noted that the matter of parking at Newton North is one on which the School Committee and the Board of Aldermen must collaborate closely, as it is the Board which gets the complaints from neighbors about parking on their streets and is called on to try to find ways to deal with those.

Jeff Young observed that the School Department decides on the programmatic needs for a high school by meeting often with the users of that school – students and faculty. He said that he tries to observe the axiom from Alderman Schnipper, who teaches at the high school in a neighboring community and is familiar with its recent renovations, to keep talking to the teachers. Alderman Stewart cautioned that, while in developing a building program one must certainly talk extensively with the users of that building, it is the person at the top who must make the final decisions on priorities for use of space. Anne Larner noted that for school buildings in Newton, it is the School Committee that makes the final program decisions on use of space. She noted that the people who use the spaces in schools change over time, and that as people change, ideas about the use of space change.

Alderman Schnipper urged that the school officials be very careful in determining the appropriate size and cost of the common spaces in the new building, such as the auditorium, library, and cafeteria, needed to accommodate a large student body because it is more difficult to expand such spaces to accommodate more students than it is to expand the number of classrooms.

Alderman Johnson urged that in projecting future enrollment trends the School Committee look at the school system as a whole and build in flexibility to deal, not just with Newton North, but with possible enrollment problems at various elementary and middle schools. She recalled the problems of the past when some schools were closed based on enrollment projections, leaving the school system to scramble to find space when it had to accommodate more students than had been projected. She asked how close the enrollment projections had been to the actual number of students to the actual numbers of students enrolled. Anne Larner responded that over time in at least recent years the projections had been close to the actual numbers of students. She observed that often the space problems at schools in recent years have been more the result of changes in program than substantial errors in enrollment projections. Jeff Young underscored that the School Department will continue to do its educational and capital planning in terms of the needs of the entire school district.

Alderman Sangiolo asked where the program design for the new building comes from, how does the School Department decide what to tell the architect in designing to accommodate that program? Jeff Young said that those decisions are made by him based on directives from the School Committee. The program design is a continuing work in progress, for which he uses two basic sources – the faculty and staff of the two high schools and research concerning space needs for a 21st century high school. Program design is an iterative process with the architect, through which the final educational specifications are developed.

Alderman Baker reported that when he was a student at Williams College he chaired a students' building committee that advised on the design of a new dormitory. That building turned out very well, but such student committees were not used in the design of future dormitories, none of which has been as satisfactory, in Alderman Baker's opinion. The lesson he takes from that is that student input on the design of facilities to be used by students is very important. He also observed that Suffolk Law School found that it was extremely beneficial to hire a space planner to work with the architect on the design of the new Suffolk Law School building in Boston. He also opined that the School Department should assign or hire a qualified staff person to serve as the School Department's liaison to the design/construction team to help ensure that what the school officials have decided they want in the school is ultimately getting into the building. Alderman Salvucci noted that Heidi Black has served as the School Department's liaison for the renovation of Newton South and that she has been extremely competent in that role. It is expected that it is she who would perform the same role for Newton North.

Jeff Young expressed great interest in the suggestion that the School Department retain a space planner to work with the architect in the design of the building and said that he would look into it further.

Alderman Baker observed that Suffolk Law School had found it extremely instructive to make site visits to other law schools. One thing that was learned from those was that wide corridors result in many good things in student comfort and learning. He cautioned the School Committee to be very careful about how and where it shaves the width of corridors. Anne Larner responded that everything about the program specifications for Newton North to date is conceptual. There is as yet no detailed design for the school. She noted that Main Street in the existing building is a good example of a very wide corridor that lends itself to informal encounters and has been a very useful element of student life at the school. Alderman Gentile noted that Main Street has been a subject of some dispute between students, who love it, and teachers, who find its use sometimes problematic. Alderman Gentile cautioned that the school officials must learn from the Main Street experience and find ways to balance the needs of students and faculty in such spaces.

Alderman Danberg observed that it is very important in a project such as that at Newton North that all eyes look at it very carefully in order to avoid mistakes and to maximize the overall benefits of the new building. She then asked if the proposed program would continue to accommodate the existing cooking program and how the school officials would consider new voc-tech programs in the future. Jeff Young responded that the program specifications fully accommodate all existing voc-tech programs, including the cooking program, and that the school officials will consider possible new voc-tech programs as the need arises. He stated that he

expects that future changes in the voc-tech program will not require additional space but can be accommodated by new equipment. He noted that new voc-tech programs in biotechnology and medical and dental technology are being housed at Newton South.

Alderman Linsky said that he is familiar with the new Suffolk Law School building and, based on the experience with that building, believes that the suggestion for use of a space planner as was done at Suffolk is a good one that is well worth considering.

Alderman Vance then stated that he will promptly prepare a full report of this meeting and that he expects to schedule another meeting of the committee for sometime in November.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:44 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Verne Vance, Chairman