

# 10 School Element

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*“Our Schools, in partnership with our community, are resolved to provide quality education for all children in Clark County regardless of income, ethnicity or ability.”* Clark County School Districts

## Introduction

Current land use planning and capital facilities funding mechanisms for schools present unique challenges under the Growth Management Act (GMA). Schools are not required as a mandatory concurrency item under the GMA, but are included along with other public services in Capital Facilities Planning and are required to be adequately provided for. Clark County and its school districts have found that there is much synergy between land use planning and quality schools and it is best for all stakeholders to be at the table when the growth management plan is updated. In order to assure full consideration of school capital facilities and to encourage a sustainable learning community in the development and implementation of city and county comprehensive plans, this chapter dedicated specifically to schools has been added to the updated plan.

School districts in Clark County are as diverse as the communities they serve. District boundary lines do not correspond to city or urban growth boundaries, but have a logic all their own. Schools are located in urban, suburban and rural areas. Districts vary in size from serving fewer than 1,000 students to over 25,000 students. For example, Green Mountain School District, the smallest district in the county, is entirely rural. In contrast, Vancouver School District lies almost entirely within the Vancouver urban growth area, and is comprised of a mix of urban and suburban development. Several districts contain land in more than one urban growth area, and most districts include all three environments.

The county’s school districts are facing the challenge of providing a quality education given the rapid growth and development of Clark County. School capacity in the county has not kept pace with enrollment growth. For example, several school districts are serving or will be serving over 30% of their enrolled students in portable classrooms. The dilemma of serving students in portables (or having “unhoused students”) is exacerbated by the continued growth projections for our region. Capital facilities demands are increased by aging infrastructure, the need for better instructional technology and facilities to support high quality teaching and learning (such as computers, presentation equipment, and science labs), the desire for equity among facilities, and the move toward smaller class sizes and special programs. School capacity, siting, and funding new facilities are discussed further under the School Capacity and Enrollment Growth section.

School districts are experiencing increased enrollment of students from families that do not speak English at home. Increased enrollment of students from immigrant families (most noticeably from Russian and Spanish speaking countries) requires the development of programs that are aimed at meeting the needs of these students and their families. School districts must plan facility needs to accommodate programs for English language learners.

School districts are also noticing a significant demographic shift of increased poverty and student mobility. The negative impact of poverty and especially, student mobility on quality education is well documented. Growth management and land use policy decisions will play an increasing role in strategies to create sustainable, vital communities that help ensure that all children can succeed. The distribution of affordable housing, living wage jobs, public transportation, and other public services across the county are key to the stability and quality of life of our residents.

## School Capacity and Enrollment Growth

The community goal is to provide proper educational facilities for students at the time they enroll. There are several factors involved in the timely provision of these facilities. School facility and student capacity needs are dictated by the types and amounts of space required to accommodate each district's educational program. The educational program components which drive facility space needs include grade configuration, optimum facility size, class size, educational program offerings, classroom utilization and scheduling requirements, and use of portable classrooms.

In addition to student population, other factors such as collective bargaining agreements, government mandates, adequacy of state funding, and community expectations also affect classroom space requirements. Traditional education programs are often supplemented by programs such as special education; bilingual education; pre-school, full-day kindergarten, and childcare; and art and music. These programs can also have a significant impact on the available student capacity of school facilities.

## School Siting

A new or remodeled school is an asset to a neighborhood and is often viewed as a community center. Siting a new school requires several considerations. Districts review the buildable lands inventory to identify land use categories where schools are allowed in the areas where residential growth is occurring. Schools typically require a full range of urban services, including public sewer, water, fire and police service. The number of acres needed for a school site varies by type of school and age group. A typical elementary school is sited on approximately 10 acres, a middle school site is about 20 acres, and a high school site can take up to 50 acres. These large parcels are hard to find, especially within an urban growth area. Districts must also compete with private developers for the land. Under the current growth conditions, land speculation drives the cost of land above its appraised value, putting the districts at a distinct disadvantage in land negotiations. The cost of land is also higher within the urban growth area and in areas that are predicted to be soon included in the urban growth area. However, districts must balance the potential capital cost savings of purchasing land on the outskirts of the urban growth area with the operational benefits of locating schools proximate to existing residential areas (i.e., maximizing community support and participation and minimizing student transportation costs).

School districts strive to avoid, if possible, the pattern of siting future schools on the outer ring of the urban growth boundary, which may encourage additional residential growth, and in turn require additional services. It takes a concerted effort by school districts, local government, and the development community to provide affordable sites for schools in more central locations. Innovative school siting can also include co-location with other public and private entities, constructing multi-story school buildings with smaller building footprints, partnerships with other public/private entities for education related services, the renovation of existing office buildings, and shared park and open space.

## School Funding

Depending on district eligibility, districts pay for a portion of the costs of capital facilities with funds provided by the State of Washington through the Common School Construction Fund. The remaining capital expenses must be raised locally, through the passage of bond levies (which raise the property taxes of all residential property owners within a particular district), and/or impact fees (which apply to new residential construction within the district). School operating funds are secured from state and federal education sources, and from local operating levies. Voter approved operating levies raise the property taxes of all residential, commercial, and industrial property owners in a district. In a

district with a high industrial and commercial tax base, residents carry a lower proportionate share of the educational operating costs.

There is currently a significant gap between the total education infrastructure cost and the funds available. While impact fees are a tool provided under GMA to deal with growth, historically the fees have accounted for less than 10% of the dollars spent on capital improvements and are limited in use. Local bond measures require a 60% super-majority vote. Several districts have a history of failed bond measures, due in part to the super-majority requirement, but also to high residential tax rates for operating levies because of an imbalance between the mix of residential, commercial, and industrial lands. The Common School Construction Fund requires that the district pass a local bond measure to match the state funds, and the match does not cover all development or site acquisition costs. State funding regulations result in new facilities being constructed after growth has occurred and a need can be demonstrated, due to the concern of overbuilding permanent facilities. The average lifespan of a school is fifty years and growth may significantly increase and decline during that time. For these reasons, "portable" or "temporary" classrooms have become common in fast growing districts.

### **Schools as Community Centers**

In addition to their primary educational function, public schools serve as a community focal point and provide facilities used for a variety of community civic and recreational needs. School day education programs are also supplemented by extended day programs, community education, recreation, early childhood programs and childcare. There is increasing community use of ball fields and gymnasiums, meeting rooms, computer labs, performing arts facilities, and media centers. Many school sites also serve as neighborhood parks. New or refurbished schools can also encourage neighborhood stability and revitalization.

In order to make the most efficient use of schools and school sites, policies in this element encourage co-location of schools with other community activities and facilities. Some examples of organizations that could co-locate with schools are parks & recreation, public libraries, community colleges, parking lots, regional transportation, performing arts facilities, health clinics, hospitals, YMCAs, church groups, eldercare facilities (kitchen, classrooms, arts/activities, meals-on-wheels), daycare providers, and senior centers. Schools could also be a component of mixed use developments.

### **Schools and Transportation**

Traffic can get congested around schools at the beginning and end of the school day and during large community events. Significantly less students walk and ride bikes to school than in the past. In 2001, less than 15 percent of students between the ages of five and 15 walked to or from school, and 1 percent biked. In comparison, in 1969, 48 percent of students walked or biked to school. More parents are driving their children to school, more high school students are driving themselves to school, and more students who live within 1 mile of the school must ride the school bus due to an inadequate "safe walking" environment.

Walking and bike riding for transportation are part of an active lifestyle that is associated with increased health benefits. Recent trends in travel to school have raised concerns of increased juvenile obesity and associated diseases. In addition, less cars on the road produce less pollution and congestion. Studies performed by the Environmental Protection Agency indicate that school proximity to students matters, especially at the elementary level. Schools which are located at the center of communities and which are co-located with other community activities are supportive of students walking and biking to school.

The built environment also influences travel choices. Students traveling through higher-quality environments (reduced traffic-related danger such as sidewalks, crossing signals, and better enforcement of speed limits, combined with classroom education of pedestrian and bike skills) are more likely to bike and walk to and from school. In response, governments at every level have launched a variety of policy initiatives. The “Safe Routes to Schools Program” is providing funding to improve the education, enforcement, and built environment for students.

A robust public transportation system is also necessary to support schools as community centers. Some students don’t have another means to get to and from school for before- and after-school activities.

The Transportation Element of this plan contains policies encouraging walking and biking through the built environment, and connectivity between school facilities and other community facilities. It also contains a transit section that is supportive of public transportation.

### **Schools and Housing**

As Clark County accommodates additional growth, the quality of the developed landscape becomes more and more critical to providing sustainable, quality education. Education literature suggests that where a child lives largely determines that child’s educational opportunities and success. Studies show that providing a variety of housing prices and types within a school attendance area to allow economically disadvantaged children into mainstream middle-class communities improves learning success for all. The land use policies in the GMA and in the Housing Element of this plan are supportive of the provision and equitable distribution of affordable housing.

### **Schools and the Economy**

The role that quality education plays in growing a strong local economy is vital. Our community expects us to prepare students for world competition in an increasingly challenging global economy. In addition, having well-educated, involved citizens is a priority if we are to have high-performance local governments, solve our community’s other pressing problems, and create and enhance a livable community.

The land use policies in the Economic Development Element of this plan are supportive of schools by focusing on providing an increased number of family wage jobs, which improves family stability and learning success. The Economic Development Element also includes goals for the education community to be supportive of growing our economy. As a major employer within a community, schools contribute to those goals by providing numerous job opportunities.

### **Schools and Parks**

School districts frequently enter into partnerships with the county or cities for the co-location of parks with school recreational facilities. Many schools are co-located with a park and/or share athletic fields and exercise programs.

Prune Hill Elementary School is an example of such a partnership. In this case the Camas School District partnered with the City of Camas in the use of Prune Hill Park, which is adjacent to and being developed concurrently with the school. The school will use the park during the school day, while the community will have access to it at other times. The cooperation saved money for both the city and the school district. The park and school are located in a suburban residential area.

## **Intergovernmental Coordination**

The quality of public schools is crucial to the overall quality of life in Clark County and cities in Clark County. Land use policies, and the development regulations that implement the land use policies, have a direct effect on school districts, public school facilities and the provision of quality education. Similarly, school district decisions regarding the location of school facilities, educational programs that are offered and the way in which our children are educated has a direct effect on the county and cities in the county. It is critical to the future of our community that the county, cities in the county and the school districts work in partnership to coordinate facilities and the provision of services. There is great value in integrating public school facility planning with the county's and cities' comprehensive land use plans.

## **Community Involvement and Public Participation**

In August of 2006, the Clark County Quality Schools Task Force began meeting. The task force was established to address the impacts of growth on K-12 capital facilities and make recommendations regarding tools that would improve the provision of quality education countywide. The task force is comprised of representatives from all of the county's school districts (except Green Mountain), the development community, the real estate sales community, Clark County and city governments.

The group has worked together to understand the possibilities and limits of education funding, and to understand the sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary needs of educators, governing bodies, and developers. The task force proposed, and this chapter contains, a new Countywide Comprehensive Plan policy that formalizes a collaborative approach and the integration of school facility needs with county and city comprehensive plans.

In addition to the focused collaboration of the Quality Schools Task Force, each school district engages in a public process when their capital facilities plans are prepared. School districts often engage the work of a facility advisory committee that is comprised of district patrons and stakeholders. The school district capital facilities plans are adopted by each district's board of directors at public meetings.

## **Existing Facilities**

### **Public K-12 Facilities**

Educational services to elementary, middle and high school students in Clark County are provided by nine different school districts, which are operated and funded independently of county or municipal government. The school districts each prepare enrollment projections and plans for new facilities based on the comprehensive plans of the jurisdictions in which they are located. The school planning horizon required by GMA is 6 years for capital facilities, including the intended funding source, updated at least every 2 years. Many districts also plan at a more conceptual level for the 20 year horizon.

State funding regulations result in new facilities being constructed after growth has occurred and a need can be demonstrated. School districts also are cautious not to overbuild permanent buildings since the average lifespan of a school is fifty years and growth may significantly increase and decline during that time. For these reasons, "portable" or "temporary" classrooms are common in fast growing districts.

A summary of current school district facilities, the number of new school facilities that are projected for the next six years, as well as the number of additional schools that are projected to serve students from housing that is forecast at build-out (or twenty years) is located in **Appendix XX CFP**.

### Higher Education Facilities

Higher education facilities within Clark County include Clark College, a 2-year institution, and the Washington State University - Vancouver campus (WSUV), a 4-year institution. Clark College and WSUV have arranged co-admissions agreements to streamline the process for students to transfer from Clark to receive a degree from WSUV. In addition, 2006 was the first year that WSUV accepted lower division students. WSUV offers three dozen fields of study and several master's and doctorate degrees, and continues to develop the Salmon Creek area campus according to an adopted Master Plan. Clark College offers several programs that provide open access to degree programs at WSUV, Eastern Washington University, Portland State University, Marylhurst University and Concordia University. In early 2006, the Clark Center, which houses its nursing studies program, classrooms, and faculty offices, opened on the WSUV campus. Clark has constructed a new classroom building for allied health programs on property just west of Gaiser Hall. In 2009, Clark increased its facilities when it constructed an east Vancouver branch campus in the Columbia Tech Center to capitalize on high-tech industry growth.

### Goals and Policies

The Growth Management Act requires the county and cities to plan for the location and provision of public schools. Schools are one of the public facilities that are addressed in the capital facilities element of the county's and cities' comprehensive plans. This 20-year Plan contains the goals and policies for schools. The goals and policies were prepared in cooperation with the school districts that are responsible for the school facilities and provision of public education. The goals and policies are intended to implement a coordinated approach that integrates the provision of quality education into overall planning for the communities that depend on quality schools and education. The goals and policies also are intended to provide guidance to the county, cities, school district, and developers regarding the acquisition and development of school facilities. The policies and implementing regulations are intended to assure the provision of proper education facilities at the time the students enroll.

School planning cannot be in isolation. The relationship between school, land-use, economic development, housing and transportation policies must be in concert and directly tied to each other throughout the comprehensive plan.

#### 10.1 Countywide Planning Policies

- 10.1.1 The county and each city shall give full consideration to the importance of school facilities and encourage development of sustainable learning environments through the adoption and implementation of county and city comprehensive land use plan policies and development regulations.
- 10.1.2 The county and the cities shall jointly establish a school advisory body that is comprised of representatives from the county, cities, school districts, and special purpose districts and other interest groups. The advisory body may undertake the following, but shall in no way compromise or complicate an individual district's authority to take actions on its own in its best interest:
  - Uniform data collection. Identify, monitor, and report to the community, at least annually, on the key performance indicators related to quality schools, capital

facilities plans, and community development (Note: one of the points is to be able to relate schools data to other annual planning data provided by the cities and the county);

- State and federal law issues. Develop issue papers and consensus recommendations regarding provisions of state and federal law which impact the adequacy and/or timely provision of school capital facilities.
- Policy development and implementation. Actively participate in the development or amendment of city and county comprehensive plans and development regulations relating to or impacting schools including:
  - Location of Urban Growth Areas;
  - Location and mix of residential land use designations;
  - Commercial/industrial tax base within each school district;
  - Potential location of future school sites;
  - Potential co-location of school facilities with other public facilities (i.e. parks);
  - Phasing of residential development;
  - Private/public partnerships;
  - School facility permitting processes;
  - School impact fees; and
  - Last resort safety net considerations.

10.1.3 The county and each city shall include sufficient vacant land at adequate sizes in the future land use categories to meet projected demand for new schools.

10.1.4 Large residential development should confer with school districts on school impacts.

10.1.5 Work cooperatively with school districts to facilitate permitting of new facilities and modernization of older facilities through clear regulations, effective on-site and off-site improvements, team approaches, and shared information regarding county processes.

10.1.6 Encourage jurisdictions to cooperate in planning and permitting school facilities through land use policies and regulations that minimize the financial burden associated with developing school facilities.

### County-Only 20-Year Planning Policies

**Goal: Encourage the location of new school facilities in areas where they can best serve students and the community.**

#### 10.2 Policies

10.2.1 School facilities serving predominantly urban populations should be preferably located in urban growth areas then in rural areas adjacent to the urban growth boundary, subject to Policy 10.2.2.

10.2.2 School facilities may be located in the rural areas where necessary to serve population growth within the urban growth area, subject to the following:

- School facilities shall be located as close to the urban growth boundary as possible, preferably within ¼ mile
- Before siting a school facility outside the urban growth area, the school district shall demonstrate that the proposed site is more suitable than alternative sites

within the existing urban growth area. Suitability includes factors such as size, topography, zoning, surrounding land uses, transportation, environmental concerns and location within the area to be served.

- The school district shall demonstrate that the transportation facilities serving the site are adequate to support site generated traffic, including buses.
- upon locating any school facility in the urban reserve or rural area, the school district shall agree to connect to public water and sewer when they become available within 300 feet or less of the site, provided such a connection does not necessitate special facilities (e.g., pump stations) or capital improvements (e.g., larger pipes) to increase the capacity of the system.

10.2.3 School facilities may be located in rural areas where necessary to serve population growth and attendance areas principally lying outside of the UGA or Rural Centers, subject to the following:

- Before siting school facilities in the rural area, the district shall demonstrate that the proposed site is more suitable than alternative sites within a UGA, urban reserve area or Rural Center. Suitability includes factors such as size, topography, zoning, surrounding land uses, transportation, environmental concerns and location within the area to be served.
- The school district shall demonstrate that the transportation facilities serving the site are adequate to support site generated traffic, including buses.
- Upon locating any school facility in a rural area, the school district shall agree to connect to public water when it becomes available within 300 feet or less of the site, provided such a connection does not necessitate special facilities or capital improvements to increase the capacity of the system.
- The school district shall agree to connect to public sewer when it becomes available within 300 feet or less of the site, provided such a connection does not necessitate special facilities or capital improvements to increase the capacity of the system. Such sewer extension shall be tight-lined and have access restrictions precluding service to the Rural Areas.

10.2.4 To encourage efficient and effective planning and to support neighborhood and community redevelopment, school facilities shall be allowed as either a conditional use or a permitted use in all urban zoning districts. Elementary (K-5) are natural elements of residential neighborhoods. They shall be permitted and not subject to conditional use permits.

**Goal: Support co-locating facilities where co-location is feasible and provides more efficient use of public facilities.**

### 10.3 Policies

10.3.1 The county, each city and school districts should explore the possibility of siting new facilities jointly with private, non-profit, or other local government owned facilities on sites that are in locations that best serve the growth projected by the comprehensive plan.

10.3.2 Where it is feasible (future school location is reasonably known), coordinate school facility plans with transportation facility plans so that roads, bicycle routes, and pedestrian routes are planned to serve future schools.



- 10.3.3 Develop pedestrian and bicycle corridors between schools and housing, within neighborhoods and rural centers.
- 10.3.4 Include school master planning in sub-area planning and/or neighborhood or community redevelopment plans.

**Goal: Adopt policies and implementing regulations that expedite the review and approval of school facilities to reduce costs without compromising the opportunity for public participation.**

**Goal: Require new development that places added demands on school facilities to pay a portion of the cost for school facilities through impact fees or other alternative mechanisms authorized by State Law.**

## **10.5 Policies**

- 10.5.1 Provide for the use of School Impact Fees as a funding source for school capital facilities.
- 10.5.2 Capital Facilities Plans for the school districts of Vancouver, Evergreen, Battle Ground, Camas, Washougal, Ridgefield, Hockinson, La Center, and Green Mountain shall be adopted by reference through the adoption of the 20-Year Comprehensive Plan.

**Goal: Provide a continuum of educational opportunities responsive to the changing needs of the work place locally and regionally.**

## **10.6 Policies**

- 10.6.1 Encourage continuing education, skills upgrading, mentoring, and lifelong learning programs suitable for large and small employers.
- 10.6.2 Consider incentives to link proposed industrial development projects with job training, education, and housing programs.
- 10.6.3 Encourage improvement of the region’s educational network, including pre-K-12 and higher education.