

PLANNING BOARD PUBLIC MEETING
MINUTES
VIA “GO TO MEETING
THE NEW GARDNER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
JUNE 9, 2020 at 7:00 p.m.

Members present: Mark M. Schafron/*Chairman*, Robert Swartz/*Vice-Chairman*, Robert J. Bettez, Sr., Stephen Cormier, and Paul A. Cormier-*Members*, and Trevor Beauregard/*Director-City Planner*.

Members absent: *None.*

Also present: Chris Coughlin-Engineering, Christine Fucile-DCDP, Margo Jones of Jones Whitsett Architects, Sara Lawrence and Bryan Obara of Stimson Studio Landscape Architecture, Eric Bernardin and Victoria Houle of Fuss & O’Neill, City Councilors Scott J. Graves and Judy Mack, and several Gardner residents (*copy of attendance on file*).

ANNOUNCEMENT - Any person may make a video or audio recording of an open session of a meeting, or may transmit the meeting through any medium, subject to reasonable requirements of the Chair as to the number, placement and operation of equipment used so as not to interfere with the conduct of the meeting. Any person intending to make such recording shall notify the Chair forthwith. All Documents referenced or used during the meeting must be submitted in duplicate to the Director of Community Development & Planning pursuant to the Open Meeting and Public Records Law. All documents shall become part of the official record of the meeting.

Mr. Schafron, Chairman called the Public Meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Mr. Schafron read aloud the Public Meeting Notice for the new Gardner Elementary School.

Eric Bernardin, Civil Engineer of Fuss & O’Neill spoke about the project.

Mr. Bernardin said this project is funded in part by the MSBA (Massachusetts School Building Authority), with grant funding of 55%. Mr. Bernardin continued with explanation of building noting there are three parts/wings. The grade level wings have 9 classes per floor with a main front door. Another door is the C Wing. There are 200 parking spaces including 4 electrical vehicle car charging stations. The school was designed to be an educational campus, and meets all MSBA guidelines. In addition, the school will be energy efficient, and provides a healthy learning environment. There are 3 buildings, two of the proposed buildings will be 3 stories in height, and one is two stories, as well as 3 vestibules to get into the school. Furthermore, to accommodate fresh air ducting, the average floor to floor height is 14 feet floor to ceiling. The exterior of the building will be solid brick which is durable for long-term.

Mr. Bernardin explained the traffic circulation, and said there are two lanes which are entry lanes with one lane going up towards the parking areas for the passenger vehicle drop off, so the

students that are being dropped off will be in the outer most lane, and they will circulate around and drop off in front of the C wing and will then exit out either back down to Pearl Street or can take the access road down to Catherine Street, or down to the Middle School/High School Complex.

The buses will go right up the middle lane, the main entry. There are 8 buses that can queue up to the front, and there are two diagonal parking bays over on the right hand/eastern side of the plan for the parents' use to park and escort their children for Pre-K and K drop off. The bus path is through the center of the site, and is one way traffic to maintain safety for the buses. The center parking lots are for visitors, administration, teachers, etc. There is also another parking lot for overflow or can be assigned as the school department sees fit. There is also a full fire lane out back as requested by the Fire Chief.

Mr. Bernardin noted a traffic study was completed in 2019. The outcome of the traffic study showed the travel speeds on Pearl Street were above what is posted, therefore, a "School Zone" was created to decrease speeds, as well as appropriate signage. Further, adding a left bound turn lane heading eastbound on Pearl Street so that through traffic can continue while there is a queue up to turn left into the school driveway. In addition, the crosswalk will be relocated, as well as a "Rapid Flash Beacon" light to be installed for pedestrian safety. Also proposing to remove some trees along the frontage which are not high quality trees which affect the sight lines to increase vehicular safety in the area. Also noted, the majority of the improvements are paintings and markings since the right of way on Pearl Street is wide enough. Therefore, no major construction.

Landscape: Sara Lawrence of Stimson introduced herself and said the organization of the site keeps all of the vehicular circulation and the paving for the parking lots on the west side of the site, while preserving the east side of the site for play and outdoor learning. Designed a lot of vegetated strips surrounding the parking, within the parking, and also outside, south of the service drive screening the service from the main entry, as well as the summit garden. There are planted berms both on the west and east side of the Pre-K building which is the C Building and is furthest to the south. At the start of the project, completed a lot of research on education and the impact that exposure to nature has on students, even just visually for focus and productivity. Once the students enter from the west, and exit to the east for play and outdoor learning, they will be immersed in natural surroundings, and the existing woodland. The different play areas were displayed and explained. The Pre-K play area right outside of the C wing has poured in place rubber surfacing with play equipment designed for smaller students, a tricycle loop, as well as ADA accessible play equipment, a little lawn area, and a small water feature. To the north is a basketball court, and to the north of the court is a large paved terrace with concrete unit pavers that can be used for gatherings in all seasons since it can be plowed.

Across the paved terrace is a play area called the "Hemlock Bowl" that also has poured in place rubber surfacing, and is the upper level of topography for this garden play space area. Moving farther to the northeast, down about 9 feet, there are two hillside "slope slides" that go down to another level of topography with existing boulders that will be salvaged from the site excavation and placed on either side of the slides along the slope. Also there will be an ADA path that wraps around. North along the fire lane is a play area using existing play equipment from Elm Street School. Shown at the top of the landscape picture, is an area called the "Oak Knoll" which is big enough for two large playfields of outdoor lawn space, as well as about 18 swings. This area is characterized by the knoll on the edge, therefore, striving to preserve the knoll,

especially because of the red oak forest that is there. There is a garden play space south of the A wing, which has room for outdoor classrooms, raised beds for gardening, more play features, and a raised overlook deck engulfed with native plantings that buffer the space from the parking below. There is a section cut from the cafeteria area all the way through the upper terrace paved area down to the lower level of the “Hemlock Bowl”.

Ms. Lawrence noted the play equipment is designed with hollowed out tree logs to climb through, black locust logs for balance beams, and a slide with a “boulder hillside” for climbing. Mr. Lawrence also noted they are trying to do a lot of salvaging on the site, such as excavating site boulders and as many large red oak logs. Ms. Lawrence brought attention to the image to the right on the play areas picture and noted the black locust climbing structure, with one for the younger age children, and one for the older children.

Flagpoles and Signs: Ms. Lawrence explained there will be a cedar wood “entry” sign on top of a field stone base, and lit from the front by flood lights, but not between the hours of 11 and 7. Moving further into the site, entering into the parking area, there will be an illuminated, digital sign which will have “static” messaging from the school for the school population. Mr. Bernardin added because of the number of signs being presented, will need to try and obtain some variances with the Building Inspector, as well as the Zoning Board of Appeals. Mr. Bernardin noted the “Permitting Overview” page showing they filed with the Planning Board, as well as the Conservation Commission for their permits, and other permits which are all in process, including MEPA, Army Corps of Engineers, and a stormwater permit with EPA NPDES.

Project Schedule: The project schedule was displayed. Mr. Bernardin said they are hoping to get the school out to bid end of July/early August, start construction October/November of this year, and plan to open in August, 2022.

Stormwater: Mr. Bernardin explained the main entry to the school is at the high point of the site which is why the school fits so well there. The majority of the drainage heads down the hill towards to the west, and some of it heads to the east. The drainage system was designed in order to match the existing conditions in order to continue flowing into the current resource areas. The roof water will be collected and infiltrated into the ground according to the DEP standards. Mr. Bernardin noted the stormwater picture displayed, and explained the areas in pink are subsurface infiltration areas that are actually underneath the parking lot in the back, and the 4 green larger areas are regular open detention basins which are away from the school for safety purposes, and also need to be lower from where the water flows. There are a few rain gardens in the upper parking lot. Further, there is a small replication area, shown in light green, because of crossing over one wetland. In addition, on the perimeter, there are two are brooks being crossed over, with one being an intermittent stream, and the other is a perennial stream, which permitting is currently being worked on with Conservation Commission.

Mr. Schafron questioned the access road onto Catherine Street and wondered if this will be one-way or two-way traffic. Mr. Bernardin replied it will be two-way traffic, but does not have sidewalks on both sides of the road. However, there is a ten-foot multi-use path which will provide some connectivity from the neighborhoods on Pearl Street and Dunn Park. Mr. Schafron said, hypothetically, a vehicle travelling east could take a left onto Catherine Street and

then a right onto the access road that way, as well as off the main drive off of Pearl Street. Mr. Bernardin answered correct, and said they envision most of the traffic to come off of Pearl Street.

Mr. Schafron asked if the Board Members had any questions or comments.

S. Cormier spoke of the emergency road (*around the back side of the school*), that actually goes through the play areas, and asked for additional explanation. Mr. Bernardin said it comes off the easterly section where Pre-K is, and for two small sections it is 14-feet wide, and in other play areas it widens out to 20 feet, which meets fire lane access, and it continues all the way around the northerly “A” wing and connects back up to the parking lot. Further, it will be gated with a Knox box, and does not allow any traffic through this area.

S. Cormier asked if the deliveries to the school will made to the front or through the access road in the back. Mr. Bernardin pointed out where the deliveries will be made right out front, and will have three loadings docks, one for the dumpster, one for recycling, and one as an open dock for food deliveries, and other miscellaneous deliveries.

S. Cormier commented he noticed there is a chain-link fence the whole length of the school along the access road going out to Catherine Street, and asked if there is any type of chain link fence to the east side of this section. Mr. Bernardin replied a chain link fence is pretty much the whole perimeter of the school. It is on both the access driveways because many of them are going to be raised due to crossing over the brooks, and there are retaining walls, for safety purposes. Additionally, the school system requested chain link fencing around the back of the play areas, including around the whole school, again, for safety purposes.

C. Coughlin asked about the site lighting leading up along the access drive. Mr. Bernardin said there is site lighting on both the access drives. Not sure of the height of the poles, but did choose architectural type. Mr. Obara commented along the access roadway and the parking area, the pole height is 20 feet, and are dark-sky compliant and light upwards. In the play area, lighting will have limited illumination, just enough for security, and is 18 feet in height.

C. Coughlin asked if the electric will be underground on the main drive off of Pearl, and if there will be stand-alone street lights. Mr. Obara said the current proposal, with some negotiations going on right now, is they may look to do some redundancy down to the high school, and may continue the duct bank down the access road through the middle school and high school. Further, they are bring conduits in for the internet, and for other communications. Mr. Obara commented they will take advantage of the best situation.

Mr. Schafron asked if anyone from the public is in favor of this plan.

Mr. Schafron, Chairman called thrice for persons wishing to testify in favor of this plan.

Mr. Schafron ask if anyone from the public is in opposition of this plan.

Mr. Steve Rockwood of 310 Pearl Street:

He was somewhat surprised by the selection of the Pearl Street site for the new elementary school in the spring of 2019. As he looked deeper at the project as a whole, came to generally support the site and the project, but did have concerns at that time. Some concerns were answered, and may be answered as the detailed plans come together go forward, and did see some progress on some of these things.

Mr. Rockwood said his property abuts the proposed school property along several boundary legs, the length of some 850 feet. The Notice of Intent submitted to the Conservation Commission is 1,018 pages. Mr. Rockwood further said as he was looking at the Notice of Intent, he noticed some of the diagrams and map pages are not fully viewable in the document as accessed. With the length and breadth of this document, and the sub-plans provided to various boards and commissions, can this board and staff be expected to review and properly process the entire filing and its ramifications given the area impacted. Given the complexity of the site, and the area impacted, it would seem an appropriate independent engineering peer review would be in order. In addition, another set of eyes such as a peer reviewer, can independently note items that the project team may not have seen, so it can be improved, and better use of resources are protected as a result of the peer review process. When he first learned of the site, the first thing that came to mind was the location of the access road for the site from Pearl Street. Mr. Rockwood asked Ms. Houle to put up the Pearl Street access road intersection to see what he is talking about. At the proposed location, where they are calling the existing logging road, which is quite close to 300 Pearl Street, and pretty much directly across the street from the Dunn Park entrance, he pretty much fears for the westbound traffic on Pearl Street. The line of sight for this westbound traffic would be limited by the curb and topography. The eastward line of sight for stopped traffic waiting at the intersection to pull out onto Pearl Street, in either direction, would be similarly limited. As we all know, school buses are not the most agile, or quick vehicles. Mr. Rockwood further noted he spoke about this concern at the City Council Public Hearing in early May of 2019 with this issue being his primary concern. He has since spoken twice with the Traffic Commission, and once with the School Building Committee. In the 14 months since this was first announced, he has seen many live presentations and updates of the plan, but remain somewhat disappointed this real concern has not been addressed.

Mr. Rockwood said he has lived at 310 Pearl Street all of his life, 60 years now, and offer some of the following thoughts. The school access road location sits on state highway route 101, just west of a curve with a radius of 970 feet, with a limited westbound line of sight. This is also downhill with the downhill section going west. One-third or one-quarter of this traffic travels on the breakdown lane delineation line, further impairing the westbound line of sight. Mr. Rockwood noted his neighbors at 300 Pearl Street have a difficult time getting out of their driveway due to this limitation on sight. He has seen the traffic study that was done and recalls the average speed in one direction which is 46 miles per hour, and the other was 43 miles per hour. The posted speed limit in this area is 30 miles per hour. With this same 30 mile per hour posting, Mr. Rockwood has observed local police officers monitoring traffic in the area somewhat frequently, especially in the last year. In clear view of the traffic moving on Pearl Street both eastbound and westbound, the officers are making traffic stops, and they are not hidden, just plain sight stops on the road. Mr. Rockwood assumes they are stopping vehicles moving in excess of 40 miles per hour. An electronic speed board has been present at that entrance site pretty much most of the year. Mr. Rockwood commented he concurs the engineers are knowledgeable people and understands they will do what they believe is required of them to meet the applicable statutory and regulatory obligations and requirements. With this said, the primary objective of the project management firm, the architect, and engineering firm, would be to get this school permitted and constructed. They need to be working for the City as a whole, and not just the School Building Committee. I expect if they put their collective minds to this concern, they can arrive at a good, and safe solution.

Another concern, Mr. Rockwood had addressed previously is the power lines. The central wing of the building looks to sit on the former power line right of way. The power lines through here were first mentioned in 1913, and clearly in place before 1927. Power companies, National Grid, Mass Electric, and predecessor companies sprayed herbicides through there. The power line here was abandoned and removed in the early 90's. The growth, such as it is along this line, has just started to recover in the past couple of years. I would question what was sprayed between 1913, 1927, and 1992. How do the herbicides breakdown, and over what period? The high spot along the power line, right of way, will be topped, lowering 15 feet. What impact will this earth work have upon the residual chemicals in the soil? What chemicals will become airborne as a result? What chemicals will now be re-exposed to surface water resources including the local surface wells, streams, Stump Pond, Dunn's Pond, the Otter River, and so forth?

One last point of information, there is a rustic fieldstone cellar hole back behind 330-340 Pearl Street near a marked potential vernal pool. Likely this is behind the 17-acre property purchased, but it appears to be within the footprint of the school site. Mr. Rockwood asked if this could be referred to the Gardner Historical Commission for research before the project breaks ground.

Mr. Rockwood thanked the Chairman for his time, and Planning Board.

Mr. Schafron, Chairman called thrice for any persons wishing to testify in opposition of this plan.

Hearing none, Mr. Schafron closed the Public Meeting.

The Public Meeting adjourned at 7:58 p.m.

All documents referenced or used during the meeting are part of the official record and are available in the Department of Community Development and Planning pursuant to the Open Meeting and Public Records Law.
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