

## Phillips: More accountability needed for school projects

By Linda M. Phillips

Thursday, October 28, 2004

I agree with Selectmen Camille Anthony (Reading Advocate 10/14/04) that it doesn't make sense to build a new school without adequate parking. Where was she when the School Committee did such a thing? Several townspeople were alarmed by problems with the new elementary school project and they repeatedly warned about traffic and parking issues at School Committee and selectmen meetings. They were attacked or abruptly cut off when they tried to raise the issue. The School Committee chose to ignore the problems, a direct result of poor School Committee and School Administration management.

Reading is the only community in the commonwealth whose School Committee builds schools instead of a community building/construction committee that oversees public school construction projects. School Building Assistance (SBA) applications requires a building committee. Even when Reading's "hand picked" building committee existed, much of the discussion and decision-making still was conducted by the administration and School Committee behind closed doors, including the parking space reduction, traffic and safety issues Selectman Anthony finds so shocking. The little that surfaced into the public view raised "red flags" for some townspeople; these people were belittled and ignored by school officials and committee members.


Four years ago, the neighbors on Sunset Rock Lane raised concerns over adequate parking and traffic issues in conjunction with the new fifth elementary school; nearly all those same neighbors have moved away now, but they rightly understood that their street was destined to become a public parking lot for the new school. (see letters on [www.IROR.org](http://www.IROR.org) news). Original Wood End schematics called for parking for 80 vehicles. Changes made by the School Committee brought it down to 41 spaces (including five handicapped), not nearly enough for staff parking, let alone parents who visit the school.

In an Oct. 16 letter to former Town Planner Ann Kreig (copied to chairman of the School Committee, Selectmen, CPDC, Fire and Police Chiefs and Town Manager) the neighbors pointed out several concerns: Using a former cul-de-sac as the only major entrance to the school posed particular problems. Feeder streets have no sidewalks and there was limited visibility at the Sunset Rock and Franklin Street intersection. The new school site is four acres smaller than the state recommendations for an elementary school, playground and parking needs. From the start, the location of Wood End Elementary school has posed major problems.

The proposed traffic study in the advertised School Building Committee (SBC) Request for Qualifications (RFQ) in May 1998 was to be completed in the elementary feasibility study phase. Instead, the architectural firm Flansburgh & Associates negotiated the traffic study out of their \$50,000 elementary school feasibility study fee. The decision to delete the traffic study from the feasibility study stage was made by former Reading

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Superintendent Harutunian and Flansburgh architect Sid Bowen, even though the School Building Committee was suppose to be the awarding authority for the study. No one on the School Building Committee or otherwise stopped Superintendent Harutunian from wielding power he legally did not have; no one cared.

The traffic study was not completed and publicly presented until well after the project was voter-approved, and months after the project application (including schematics of the school project) was submitted to School Building Assistance at the Department of Education. This backward chain of events assured there would be no public objections or opportunity to objectively review or address potential problem areas in time to have any impact on the project.

The town manager, on Dec. 9, 1998 sent a letter to School Building Committee Chair Russ Graham, suggesting that they conduct a traffic study "sooner rather than later". The town manager's request was ignored by Mr. Graham and the School Building Committee. Community Planning and Development Committee (CPDC) also requested in a Feb. 25, 2000 letter to School Committee Chairman Peter Dahl that, "the services of a traffic engineer be part of the follow-up site plan meeting" which was held in June 2000. Again, the School Committee ignored the CPDC's request for a traffic study. Twice, requests made by public officials were ignored by the School Committee. Accountability has not been a trademark of the Reading School Committee or school administration.

What can we do to avoid the same thing happening again with the current school projects? The same traffic, parking and safety problems will occur at the renovated Barrows School site and the new high school unless intervention by other public officials hold the School Committee's plans and decisions accountable to the public.

Prior to renovation, the Barrows school had approximately 30 on-site spaces with 30 cars regularly parked on neighborhood side roads. The Barrows neighborhood was promised MORE on-site parking (versus on-street parking). After Flansburgh created three different sets of plans for the Barrows renovation, (under whose directive, when?), it is not clear now how many parking spaces are planned at the Barrows school.

Likewise, parking for the high school project has been reduced. Originally, residents were promised the high school project would include 575 on-site parking spaces. Now there are only 524 on-site spaces planned (+69 spaces on the street); Reading's zoning regulations required 652 spaces for high school occupancy and public events. This means that the parking spaces currently included in the RMHS renovation project are 59 fewer spaces than zoning requires. If the second gym that the School Committee has been discussing (to replace the existing structurally sound 'Girl's Gym' slated to be demolished) is built, another 50 additional on-site parking spaces potentially could be lost.

I would recommend the following:

The Selectmen should have an effective liaison with the School Committee, not a rubber stamp who dares not to hold the School Committee accountable for decisions made affecting the entire town. Too many decisions have been made secretly; business involving school projects must be made in public during public meetings in compliance with the Open Meeting Laws. The more public review on the projects, the better the outcome.

The Selectmen's agenda should include regular school construction briefings by the School Committee. These projects are owned by the whole community and should be closely monitored to assure that the public's business takes place in public and that there are no surprises. Surprises that come to mind are the 150-square-foot reduction per grades 1-5 classroom space, well below state recommendations and proposed to the voters, and a 50 percent reduction in gym size, as occurred in the new Wood End School and never discussed or voted in public.

The School Committee's lack of responsiveness to public concerns over Reading's public construction projects should be challenged whenever the committee ignores public input or does public business in private.

Our entire community is vested in the positive outcome of these multi-million dollar public building projects. The best interests of the town should be paramount, not the pride of individuals or special interest groups.

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