

Special Meeting with Happy Valley Neighbors
November 24, 2014
4-5 p.m.

Leading the meeting: Superintendent Greg Baker

Neighbors in attendance: 9 neighbors attended

Staff in attendance: Assistant Superintendent of Finance and Operations Ron Cowan and Executive Director of Communications and Community Relations Tanya Rowe

Meeting Purpose: Invited neighbors who live on Mill and 27 streets who attended the Sept. 16, 2014 input meeting and expressed traffic-related concerns regarding the Happy Valley Educational Specifications/Design Advisory Committee's preferred site plan. Dr. Baker wanted to share his thinking regarding the committee's recommendation and hear any final thoughts from neighbors before he makes a decision on the schematic design for the new Happy Valley Elementary School, which will include a site plan decision.

Comments:

A neighbor expressed appreciation for the traffic study that was conducted and asked to see the full report. (Note: It has been posted on the committee's website [here](#).) He wanted to know where we are in the process.

Dr. Baker shared this is a final opportunity for input; he is prepared to make a decision after having received the committee's [recommendation](#), which included an addendum of traffic-related concerns and the actions taken to address them. This [addendum](#) was mailed to neighbors in advance of this meeting for their review.

A neighbor asked if the traffic study addressed safety. On page 6 of this [document](#), the chart includes the criteria used to conduct the independent traffic study.

A neighbor liked that most trees will be preserved on the east entrance and that the parking spaces have been reduced from 25 spaces to 7 in that area, as well as having gates for this parking lot.

A neighbor said that the unknowns make her concerned – not knowing the exact number of trees that will need to be removed for the entrance and exit to the lot; the exact number of cars coming and going each day, etc. She prefers the site plan that has the district build a service road along the northern property. She also expressed concern that this process began a year ago and neighbors weren't involved until July.

Dr. Baker reviewed the process that began on April 10, 2014 (the first committee meeting date). Three community meetings were held on April 21, July 21 and Sept. 16, 2014. A meeting with concerned neighbors was also held on August 1, 2014.

A neighbor felt that they haven't been engaged enough in the process or have not received communication.

A neighbor said she bought her house because it was on a dead-end street: It is peaceful and pastoral, and it's hard to have someone want to change that. She didn't anticipate this could change and feels sad about losing that.

Dr. Baker expressed appreciation for the honesty and sincerity of this comment. He also talked about other changes to this area (when a cul-de-sac was added) that previously increased traffic to this area. He acknowledged that any neighbor could change the landscape.

A neighbor expressed concern about the comment in the [addendum](#) that buses will safely navigate the roads.

Dr. Baker noted that Happy Valley students who live in this area will likely have a more direct, safe walking route to school, including some who might live on 27th Street or Mill Avenue.

A neighbor agreed with the emotional response of wanting to keep their dead-end street quiet with no increase in traffic.

Dr. Baker noted that when it's time to make a decision, as it is now, some people often feel the process isn't good if they don't agree with the decision and others can appreciate that there was a process even if they don't like the outcome.

A neighbor asked Dr. Baker if he has walked the area. Yes.

The group discussed the alternative site plan of building a service road on the northern property. The committee, City of Bellingham, and Dr. Baker do not think this is the best option because costs associated with the road would take away from the new school and existing public infrastructure supports the preferred site plan. The group also reviewed the Sanitary Service information in the [addendum](#).

A neighbor asked about the exact times that the gate will be open and closed to the east entrance. Dr. Baker said we would not guarantee exact hours for limiting access at this point in the design process. We have many places in the district where this works well.

A neighbor expressed concern that traffic flow on 24th Street will not be improved with the preferred site plan. Ron Cowan explained that the large parking area and car drop-off loop off 24th Street in the preferred plan does not currently exist and will greatly help improve traffic congestion on 24th Street. Dr. Baker added that we've given some thought to opening up 27th Street through to Douglas to make more ways to access the site, but this really runs counter to neighbors' desires and the committee has not recommended doing this.

A neighbor thanked Dr. Baker and Mr. Cowan for the additional work that has been done since neighbors initially expressed their concerns. She said it seems the neighbors need to bow gracefully and accept more traffic, but she remains concerned about safety. She added that opening 27th Street through to Douglas would be a worst nightmare. She went on to say they just don't want to lose our neighborhood's rustic feel, but it's obvious you've been working to address our concerns. Our society is car-dependent and this is a big part of the problem.

Dr. Baker said this is a hard decision when you have people who are passionate and care about education and who feel what you're doing is not the best option. He summarized that he heard:

- appreciation for a process;
- skepticism and concerns about the process;
- acknowledgement by neighbors of a "not in my backyard" sentiment;
- requests that we minimize the impact of traffic accessing the school from the east entrance as much as possible; and
- acknowledgment that this is working well elsewhere, but skepticism that it will work in this area.

A neighbor expressed appreciation for slowing down the process from planning to make a decision in September to delaying until now to give more time to address concerns.

A neighbor asked about construction traffic during the building process and requested that this be minimized. Ron Cowan acknowledged that construction vehicles will need to access the school using Mill Avenue and 27th Street, but that we will work to minimize disruption. We had great success recently working with Birchwood neighbors.

Dr. Baker said he knows there is a lot of ambiguity now and looks forward to when this project is completed. It may not be perfect, but we can continue to communicate and work together. He also said some take-aways from this meeting is that neighbors liked the direct mail to their homes for communications rather than relying on the website, news or neighborhood association; this can be helpful in working with other neighborhoods on future projects. The group also requested communication along the fence-line and that the district still seek ways to give the neighborhood something whether it's more sidewalks, lighting or landscaping around the east entrance.