

2013-14 Larrabee Think Tank

November 21, 2013 – Meeting #1 Minutes

1. Rob McElroy and Ron Cowan welcomed everyone at 4:30 p.m. and asked each member to introduce themselves.
2. Ron asked the Think Tank to think about any concerns they might have, as well as hopes and dreams for the facility, and to share their thoughts if comfortable doing so. Some of what was shared included:
 - Some type of educational purpose;
 - Would like to see the facility used for adult education (Academy of Life-Long Learning);
 - City community center (realizing impediments as far as accessibility);
 - The outdoor space is an important resource (playground, field, basketball court). The Larrabee neighborhood lacks spaces for children to play and hope the fields and playground remains accessible to children and the public. The sign currently posted is great – hopefully it will stay.
 - Doesn't care what the final decision is, but seeing life in the building is important, doesn't want to see the building die.
 - Would like to see the building preserved historically, but choose something economically sustainable.
 - Partnership with the City, perhaps enlarge the park if the portables can be removed.
 - Senator Murray has approved more funding for preschool; small schools are good for small children, so perhaps Larrabee could stay open as a K-3 school, with older students going to a larger school.
 - Larrabee is not accessible to those with disabilities; the steps are a challenge; elevators are not too expensive to install.
 - Are there examples of sustainable repurposing of schools that can be looked at?
 - In California, repurposed schools are leased by private schools, with the playground still accessible to the neighborhood.
 - Could the building be used by homeschool students?
 - The funding for the purchase of the land and building were originally donated by the Larrabee family – would like to see that spirit of giving back to the community carried forward.
 - There may be grants available for an elevator and ramps.
3. Ron stated that the District wants the facility to be used, not to be vacant. The preference would be that it be used as some type of education facility – whether that be for a District-run program, or leased to an outside program/agency. There is no intention to block the playground for use by the neighborhood. There are no plans to sell (it has not been advertised to sell, nor has the District contacted a real estate agent

to list the property). There are no plans to tear the building down. The intention is to be a good neighbor, keeping up with needed repairs and maintenance of the landscaping, etc. This committee is not a “loaded” process – it is intended to be transparent, open, and honest – and the District will tell the truth about its intentions. The question was asked if the District would sell the property if approached with an offer. Ron stated that the District would be obligated to review any offers that might be presented.

4. Ron distributed a copy of the administrative policy relating to the sale of property (Policy 6882).
5. The question was asked if the District would finance a new program that would be housed in the Larrabee facility. Ron stated that it is a possibility. A proposal could be made (preschool, homeschool, and the highly capable program are examples of what has been brought up as ideas).
6. Rob stated that there have been many schools retired from the Bellingham Public Schools over the years, and he reviewed some of those.
7. Ron handed out an outline of the Think Tank, which includes the basis for establishment, the decision-making process, the purposes/goals of the group, the plan of work, and the timeline. Ron stated that the Think Tank is an advisory only and will not be making a final decision. The Think Tank will develop a process for gathering repurposing ideas (from the district, staff, and neighbors); will do some evaluating of those ideas; and will share the gathered information with the Superintendent. A recommended maintenance/security plan may also be recommended in the event the building is vacant in September. In talking about the timeline, Ron indicated that the hope is to be wrapped up by the end of February, but it is more important to do good work than to meet the timeline.
8. Rob handed out norms, outlining how the group will work together. These are a starting place only, and the group should not feel locked into these norms. Some suggestions included making sure all voices are heard, and raising hands to be heard. It was agreed that the Think Tank would move forward with these norms.
9. Ron handed out the floor plan for all three floors of the building. Think Tank member Terry Brown (an architect) reviewed the floor plan. Of note:
 - There are two separate structures.
 - The property is 1.3 acres. The average school sits on 10-15 acres.
 - The original building was built in 1920 and is a Type III-N (masonry, not rated). This original building houses classrooms, a library, cafeteria, and other spaces. The building is considered a “brittle” building with a low sloped roof.

- There was an addition in 1954 which is Type V-N (wood frame, not rated). This addition includes a multipurpose (gym) building with a platform and two small dressing rooms.
- The structure received a seismic upgrade in 2010.
- The mechanical, electrical and plumbing systems are all original. The heating system and most of the lighting has been replaced.
- There is no parking on-site, and no bus zone (the bus loading/unloading occurs on the street).
- The projected cost to add an elevator would be in the neighborhood of \$100,000 – and that does not take into account any needed structural modifications.
- There are accessibility issues, including no elevators or ramps and the restrooms are not accessible for wheelchair access.

10. The question was asked whether the building is on any historical registries. It is not.

11. Ron indicated there are no plans to put money into the facility, unless it will be used for a District-run program.

12. The question was asked if the building materials, even though old, were better at the time the structure was built. Mr. Brown indicated that, while it is true that the actual building materials may have been of better quality than those found today, the building practices at the time Larrabee were built were not as good (walls not tied together, etc.).

13. A member asked if a change in building use could trigger needed upgrades. Jim Tinner, City of Bellingham, indicated that if the future use was not a more dangerous use, any upgrades would be relatively minor. If new equipment were to be installed, that would be subject to new codes.

14. The question of installing a “lift” rather than an elevator was raised. Rick Benner, Western Washington University, indicated that the University has had little success with lifts (they are very slow, beepers attract attention which may cause people to not want to use them, and it is difficult to install them without limiting the stairways).

15. Ron indicated that the next meeting will include some discussion regarding zoning.

16. The group was led on a tour by Kate Baehr, Larrabee principal.

17. The meeting was adjourned at 6:00 p.m.

Next Meeting December 12, 2013 4:30-6:00 pm
Location TBD