

2013-14 Repurposing Larrabee Think Tank

December 12, 2013 Meeting Minutes

1. Rob McElroy and Ron Cowan welcomed everyone at 4:30 p.m. and noted that Ed Simpson from Western Washington University is in attendance, as Rick Benner is currently out of the country.
2. Rob asked if anyone had questions before getting started on the agenda. The questions raised were:
 - What power does this group have? Rob answered that the Think Tank is an advisory group formed to gather ideas, assess ideas, and communicate pros/cons to the Superintendent. The Think Tank is not a decision-making group.
 - A member heard that Dr. Baker believes elementary schools should have an average enrollment of 500 students. Rob responded he hadn't heard that, but that enrollment at Bellingham elementary schools are on the small size when compared with others in the state and nation. Program and collaboration benefits tend to be achieved when elementary schools have 2-3 sections per grade. So a PreK-5 school could be 400-500 depending on what special programs were housed in the school.
 - A member mentioned a recent Seattle Times article which addresses the expansion of free preschool to families with low or moderate incomes.
3. Rob asked everyone to review the minutes from the Nov. 21st meeting. Terry Brown made a motion that the minutes be approved as presented. Alex Brede seconded the motion, and all those present were in favor of accepting the minutes as written.
4. Ron passed out a Zoning Summary handout. Kathy Bell of the City of Bellingham recently led Ron through the zoning possibilities for the building, and Ron provided a summary to the group. Currently the Larrabee property is zoned as "Public", and the only use that would not require any special permission is a school. It is possible to apply for "Accessory Use" zoning, which would be granted by the Director of Planning & Economic Development for the City of Bellingham. To change the zoning to "Conditional Use" would necessitate a proposal to go before a Hearing Commissioner. "Adaptive Use" would require listing on the Local Historic Register. If the district were to ever sell the property, the zoning would revert to "Single Family".
5. Rob told the group that he believes this to be an honest, transparent process. At the first meeting, someone had asked if the district has a planned use for the property. As an update, there will be a need for "swing" spaces – programs, offices while current sites are being renovated (e.g. Options, District Office). There has also been discussion

that the school district may be going forward with a homeschool partnership. At this time it has not been determined where the partnership would be located or when it would be implemented. It is hoped that this committee will continue to be a thought partner in looking at suitable uses for the Larrabee facility, whether that be for a district use or a non-district use. Something to keep in mind is that a district use would take priority over a non-district use. Comments from those present included:

- I would like to know what ideas are out there, but I also don't know that this group should not spend an inordinate amount of time investigating ideas if none of them will truly be considered as options.
- I recall from the previous meeting that there is no money available to bring the building up to code or make any improvements. Ron clarified that as long as there is no change in the use (from a school use), there would not be a requirement to bring the building up to code. Ron pointed out that one criterion when considering proposals is that the lessee would pay for any necessary upgrades to the building.
- It was clarified that a homeschool partnership would be considered a district use and would be run and staffed by the Bellingham School District.

Ron mentioned that another district program that could potentially be interested in the building is the Highly Capable Program, which is currently a pull-out model for current Bellingham School District students.

The question was asked if it would be possible to have more than one use by more than one entity, and Ron indicated that it is a possibility.

Rob asked the group if there could be some discussion about whether there is interest in continuing the work. There were some present who indicated they would like to follow through with the commitment to look at proposals. One member expressed concern that if there is a planned district use, it may be a waste of time to consider outside proposals. Another member suggested postponing this work indefinitely, until there is a greater possibility of the building being considered for a community purpose.

Ron stated that he would value the input of the members of this group, particularly to develop criteria and help to solicit ideas. He suggested that ideas could be rated on a "tier" system, with Tier 1 being district uses and Tier 2 being uses other than a district program or use.

One member asked if there was a possibility that Larrabee would be used as a swing space indefinitely, and stated that as a neighborhood resident she would like to see a more permanent use being decided on eventually.

One member stated that he would like to know if there will be some direction as to whether the district is looking at a 5 year plan or a 20 year plan. If we are looking at a

20 year plan, then likely there will need to be some mechanical upgrades made to the building. It was noted that in 2010 the District invested in seismic upgrades, and then it was decided that Larrabee would no longer be used as a K-5 school. Ron stated that from a moral standpoint the seismic upgrades were necessary for safety reasons, and at that point there was no thought that Larrabee would be closing. The reason Larrabee is closing is not for budget reasons, but because it no longer functions well as a K-5 school. Mike Anderson stated he was on the Facilities Task Force, and it was the Task Force who suggested that Larrabee be closed.

One member asked if the district has a grant writer, as potentially the district could apply for grants to make upgrades to the property. Rob indicated that a grant writer was just hired by the district. Ron pointed out that it is not the work of this group to decide if physical improvements should be made to the property – a potential lessee of the property would accept the building as-is or would be prepared to fund any necessary upgrades or renovations.

Two members indicated that they like the Tier 1/Tier 2 suggestion. Following this discussion there was group consensus that there was value in continuing the work using a 2-Tier approach.

A member asked, if once criteria is developed, would the group be looking at parking? Ron indicated that parking could be considered when talking about criteria.

One member stated he agrees with focusing on district needs first - whether it be a swing space for Options, a homeschool partnership, etc. Someone pointed out that if the site is used as a homeschool or as a temporary site for Options, more traffic is likely.

6. Ron asked Katie Franks (Development Specialist with the City of Bellingham) to speak regarding the repurposing process that the City of Bellingham went through with the South Side Fire Station #2. Katie shared the "Request for Proposals" document that was prepared by the City of Bellingham. She stated that the City received several proposals for different types of uses. She advised that the Think Tank should decide what is important when establishing criteria, and how much weight to give each criterion. She suggested using the example from the City as a framework, and also suggested that the building be added to the National Register of Historic Places. One member talked about serving on the Fire House Committee, and she would expect that there will be proposals made to tear Larrabee down. Ron reminded those present that there are no plans to demolish the building, or to list the property for sale. The district wants the facility to be used and not be left vacant. One member asked if this group would be submitting its suggested criteria to the district, with the district then reviewing and possibly making changes to the criteria. Ron indicated that this group (the Think Tank) will be developing the criteria that they believe is important when evaluating proposals.

7. The committee broke up into small groups to begin working on developing the criteria that would be used to evaluate proposals. A lot of small group discussion ensued, and each group recorded their ideas on large flip-chart paper.
8. Ron introduced Steve Swan, Vice-President for University Relations and Community Development, Western Washington University. Steve is currently involved with repurposing the Armory Building. Steve indicated that Ed Simpson is also very familiar with Armory repurposing project. Steve stated that Western Washington University decided that the Armory no longer had a functional purpose for WWU. Currently the facility is being used for storage. The university did invest approximately \$1,000,000 to stabilize the building. The university pulled together a community group to go through the RFI process. He pointed out that finding a use that is compatible with the neighborhood is challenging, but is a guiding principle. Steve has been compiling a list of developers state-wide who have had prior experience with adaptive use. That will then guide WWU to come up with an RFI. The university is already getting periphery interest, before putting the RFI out. Some of the uses that he has heard include an International school, a church, a theater, and a facility focused on alternative energy production. Once it was made public that the university would be repurposing the building, people started talking about potential uses. Steve passed around an unfinished marketing document which contains pictures of building, inside and out; assets of Bellingham; site characteristics; information requirements, etc. He indicated that it should be a final, completed document in approximately 30 days. Rob asked if criteria have been established yet. Steve indicated that they are in the process of identifying key criteria, and they will develop the key criteria after soliciting ideas. They are about 9 months into the process. He indicated they have opened the building so people can see the potential. They are trying to engage with folks in Seattle who have been through the process, and the university would provide access to the Armory if the Think Tank believes it would be helpful.
9. Ron and Rob asked individuals to be thinking between now and the next meeting about developing the criteria and to also think about what a template would look like. A member asked if Larrabee would be considered as a permanent site for Options High School. Ron indicated that it is not likely that Options would be permanently in the Larrabee facility, as the bond issue was very clear that the new Options would be built at the current site.
10. The meeting was adjourned at 6:01 p.m.

Next Meeting January 9, 2014 4:30-6:00 pm
Whatcom Middle School Library