

Master Planning School District Facility Needs

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Most educational entities confront any number of facility issues. Upgrading the physical infrastructure to meet current and future demands can be intimidating. The quantity and magnitude of capital issues in a changing environment can be overwhelming. How can all this complexity be made coherent to assure that decisions are sound and limited resources are wisely allocated?

The answer is the Facility Master Plan.

The purpose of the Facility Master Plan (FMP) is simple: To provide a road map from the existing physical plant to a consensus future vision of educational environments that is fully aligned with the mission of the school district.

The FMP is an investment that coordinates and aligns many diverse considerations into a strategic long term vision for facilities. It can be cursory or comprehensive, limited to an individual facility or targeted to specific grade levels. A comprehensive FMP includes every capital asset within a district. The more effort that is put into the FMP, the more credible the results will be. Among many advantages, a well-executed FMP can be a significant factor in establishing the credibility necessary to gain voter acceptance, state or federal funding, or grants.

Participants and stakeholders

The most viable FMPs reflect extensive engagement of school administration and affected stakeholders. The FMP effort is led by experienced professionals with a

strong grasp of the technical aspects of facility planning, as well as leadership capabilities and facilitation skills. They share empathy with a diverse group of participants from the district and community forming the Advisory Committee. They are equally comfortable in large contentious groups as well as one on one settings. Qualified professional facility planners have a solid understanding of education, buildings, and people.

Student participation in the FMP process is strongly recommended. Students are the ultimate client and given the opportunity, they can inspire adults with their enthusiasm and creativity. Opening young eyes to a multitude of career tracks is another powerful benefit of involvement.

Communication

In order to be credible, the FMP reflects the extensive input from many constituencies and stakeholders. In the most basic terms, communication should enable groups to arrive at a mutual understanding of the values and goals of the community.

The Facility Planning Advisory

Committee (FPAC) generates consensus while ensuring that the district's core values and goals remain relevant. The Board should be kept apprised of all decisions, including when they need to be made and who should be involved.

Open and candid communication is essential. To facilitate this objective, the FPAC should be knowledgeable of streamlined and efficient—yet interactive and productive—methods for collaboration. A number of communication formats are available to move the process forward. The planning effort may utilize any one or combination of these.

- Marathon “brainstorming” sessions are one proven method to engage the community. Such sessions are most appropriate for initial identification of issues and visions.
- Workshops and public planning sessions are another alternative for data collection, communication, and validation. A workshop for administrators and Board members may be appropriate before a master plan program is initiated.



Riverside Middle School, New Castle, Colorado

- Focus groups can add depth to the FPAC. They usually consist of stakeholders in every entity affected by the district or its facilities. The intent is to consider all aspects of facility planning and establish a firm understanding of the many dimensions of the FMP exercise.
- A mobile “studio” for coordinating on-site discussions and reviewing concept options in real time with the FPAC can reinforce the interactive process, especially during concept development. This can lead to more efficient use of time and resources, and also give a greater sense of ownership.
- As concepts solidify, a more structured community planning charette can keep the FMPAC on task and the community informed and engaged in the planning process.
- In today’s flat world, opportunities also exist for on-line surveys and electronic communication at every stage of the FMP process.

Regardless of the format, the willingness of the FPAC to digest the information and make decisions in a timely manner will have a critical impact on the master planning outcome. The importance of consistent-

ly communicating with and listening to the public during the entire planning process cannot be overemphasized. Communities often have emotional connections with their school buildings. Upon completion of the master plan, the Advisory Committee should continue to participate in public dialogue to enhance the credibility of the School District’s public relations efforts.

Decisions can be reached in a timely manner if a logical, systematic process is adopted before the planning effort begins. Many times the issue of decision-making is not addressed until a major decision needs to be made and by then it may be too late to implement rational protocols.

Emotions and politics can cloud the issues, consume valuable time and result in decisions that may not be well aligned with initial principles. The key to streamlining the decision-making process is to allow for maximum input from the stakeholders while clearly defining roles, limitations, and final decision making authority.

Process

The FMP process is comprised of five interrelated phases or “steps” that can take days, weeks, or months each, depending upon the number of facilities and expected outcomes:

STEP 1:

VISION

(IDENTIFICATION)

The vision is the foundation of the master plan. It defines many variables that affect the learning environment, and is conducive to the growth of its students, staff, and community. Components of this vision include:

• *Mission Statement*

Core values and goals serve as a practical and creative compass for all future decisions. What is the vision 5, 10, 25 years from now? What curricula will be delivered? What school district, state and federal requirements will apply? How will facilities serve in achieving this mission? It is also necessary to establish parameters such as time frame and budgets.

• *Demographics*

Besides enrollment projections, demographic analysis includes quantitative and qualitative profiles of both community and district. Understanding the community is basic to the FMP process. What is the economic base and what is the future outlook? Is equity or independence between facilities important to the entire community? When demo-

graphic data are evaluated in the context of mission and educational program, a framework for capital planning begins to develop.

- **Educational Program**

Whether for general education or magnet or alternative programs, the physical plant must be capable and flexible enough to support the teaching and learning process. What are the parameters for grade distribution, open enrollment, alternative programs, and charter schools? Educational specifications are the traditional method for establishing the link between curriculum, building, and site and are the basis for assessment, budgeting, concept development, and all phases of the FMP development that follow.

- **Technology Plan**

What role does IT play in teaching, learning, and administration? It is essential to validate or develop a technology and communications plan early in the FMP process. The vision for technologies and technology integration has immense implications for instruction, management, life safety systems, and community relations.

- **Business Plan:**

Non-educational considerations also have an important role in the vision. Analogous to the Facility Master Plan, the business plan for a school or district provides a coordinated and unified vision of the overall organization. The focus of the business is its structure, services,

and financial matters. Past, current, and projected finances are typically the core of the business plan, but it also defines management, operations, and personnel. Capital expenditures are second only to the costs of human resources, and the two are inextricably linked. The business plan identifies both staffing and functions to be outsourced. Other components of the business plan are public relations and marketing.

During this visioning stage, it is important to understand that consensus is elusive. *The CEFPI Educational Facility Planner* Volume 43 #1 offers a good overview of educational trends and counter trends. The Advisory Committee must be able to distinguish between those issues that tend to be perpetually in



Coal Ridge High School Media Center, New Castle, Colorado

flux and those that remain virtually unchanged across generations. School facilities serve fluid populations and priorities for decades and need to be planned for a multitude of eventualities. The experienced professional recognizes that custom design for ephemeral trends and personalities is not a sound basis for sustainability; nor is design that is flexible to the point of being functionless.

STEP 2:

ASSESSMENT

(RESEARCH)

If the vision is the destination, the assessment is the starting line. This part of the FMP process seeks, aggregates, and evaluates diverse information to fully understand the current conditions of facilities and capital assets. Existing assets range from school buildings and sites to vacant land and also include administration buildings and support services. As the district grows, and facilities are upgraded or added on, transportation, maintenance, business, finance, and administration will be proportionally affected.

“Assessment” is typically interpreted as a physical inspection of facilities, but the most productive facility assessments are those that also include the perspectives of data and people. Legacy information includes the review of any existing comprehensive plans, facility and site evaluations, and similar information. Maintenance and facility management programs also provide significant assessment data.

The facility assessment typically consists of the following components:

- Architectural
- Educational Adequacy
- Functionality
- Acoustics
- Capacity

- Utilization
- Building Envelope; Roof
- Building Code
- Accessibility, ADA
- Environmental
- Structural
- Safety/Security
- Mechanical
- Plumbing
- Electrical
- Site
- Civil
- Landscape
- Geotechnical
- Maintainability
- Telecommunications
- Sustainability
- Cultural / Historical

Engagement of stakeholders is essential if accurate and comprehensive information is the goal. Success of the master plan is proportional to the number of building user groups involved in the process. Peoples’ insights can transform lifeless numbers and technicalities into meaningful concepts of educational adequacy. Depending upon quality and completeness of the legacy data, objectives, available time, and budget, the facility assessment is best executed in a hierarchy of increasing intensity:

- **Census:** Basic identification and location of physical assets
- **Baseline data:** Areas, sizes, capacities
- **Screening:** cursory overview of conditions at a macro level
- **Audit:** Identification of capital needs by system or program, usually visual
- **Analytic:** Measurement and quantification of capital needs by component
- **Forensic:** Intrusive investigation of targeted capital needs

- **Performance:** Research, computation, evaluation and comparison of targeted systems to established benchmarks
- **Life Cycle:** Modeling of targeted systems to predict future performance

STEP 3:

PROJECT DEFINITION

When visions are compared against assessed conditions, the process of developing viable capital projects can begin. In this phase of the Master Planning process, capital needs are developed, scoped, prioritized, consolidated, and sequenced into integrated short and long term capital projects to optimize future procurement. Concept plans are sketched. Project budgets are developed. Costs and benefits are weighed. Options and alternative scenarios are also explored at this time. Community, shared, or joint use of facilities with other public or private entities can provide additional opportunities. Proposed solutions need to be optimized to balance multiple, often conflicting objectives and constraints. Right sizing can optimize efficiencies and operating costs. With a talented FMP team, problems can turn into opportunities.

STEP 4:

VALIDATION

Internal review and on-site confirmation of the proposed scope of the Master Plan should be routine, but in order to achieve broad public acceptance, the master plan must be more than a purely technical document. Educational, financial, and political sensitivities should be integral to the master plan development.

Stakeholder and external validations are a critical component for the success of the FMP. The viability of long term capital improve-

ment concepts and proposals needs to be confirmed by the affected stakeholders. For bond elections, the entire community must be engaged to assure success.

STEP 5:



(RECOMMENDATION)

The final FMP incorporates feedback from the validation process and becomes the map of how the school district can journey from where it is to where it wishes to be. A well executed FMP serves as the basis for evidence-based strategic facility decision making and should remain viable for at least a decade, but should allow for regular updates as the profile of the district and the curricula evolve. A quality FMP document should include the following:

- Guiding principles of the organization including a mission statement and vision.
- Acknowledgement of stakeholders and participants
- Present and future educational programs
- The context of community and neighborhood including cultural and historical values
- Background, history
- Parameters and constraints
- Summary of assessments for the entire physical plant including comparison of program requirements to existing building and site conditions
- Analysis of renovation / addition / replacement / adaptive re-use alternatives
- Itemized capital improvements including scope, priority, and cost analysis
- Overview of scopes and budgets and cost efficiencies with

proposed solutions, alternatives, priorities and schedules

- Conceptual plans and diagrams
- Issues, opportunities, and options
- Capacity and utilization
- Educational rebalancing
- Budgets, life cycle costs and funding scenarios
- Recommendations

The well executed FMP correlates diverse goals and parameters into a comprehensive package that permits present and future school leaders to consistently make sound capital decisions. A quality FMP will serve students, staff, administration, and community for many years. It is one of the most important documents from a district management and operations perspective as it guides future growth and development. The Master Planning process can be arduous, time consuming, and emotional at times. With the suggested approach that is led by experienced professionals and engages the entire community, the outcome will provide an easy to follow guideline for the future leadership of the School District. With a quality Facility Master Plan, educational leaders are poised to embrace the future. ■

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