

Community Meeting 1 for: West Somerville Neighborhood School Yard (WSNS)

Meeting Date: December 11, 2019
Presenters: Arn Franzen, Senior Project Manager, Public Space & Urban Forestry
D.J. Chagnon, CBA Principal-in-Charge & WSNS Project Manager
Kaila Bachman, CBA Principal, Brown School Project Manager

Arn Franzen introduced the meeting and provided a brief overview of the process, as well as recognizing Principal Kathleen Seward and Ward 7 Councilor Katjana Ballentyne, both of whom shared brief remarks about the project. Arn then introduced CBA Landscape Architects LLC, the lead designers for the renovations of the West Somerville and Brown Schools, which are being designed in tandem for upcoming renovations.

D.J. Chagnon of CBA presented an introduction to CBA, including a number of past projects that have some potential relevance to the WSNS site and a summary of our site analysis to date. He also shared an overview of the issues raised in the December 2018 Community Meeting and the feedback collected during a meeting with WSNS teachers during their Election Day professional development session. The presentation concluded with possible precedent images and ideas to inspire discussion, and five preliminary conceptual layouts for community feedback. Below is a summary of the questions and comments brought up for discussion during the meeting, organized by topic:

Entrances/Access:

- ∨ Is there a way to eliminate the “cluster factor” of adults around the exit door during pick-up? Loud, chaotic environment, can be very overwhelming and anxiety-producing for parents and children.
- ∨ On most days pick-up is from the door near the playground and the sidewalk is very narrow. During rainy or snowy days, students are released from the cafeteria doors.
 - ∨ (CBA) We can help address this by creating a larger and more defined area for pick-up in what is currently the playground.
 - ∨ (City) There are probably some policy changes that could be made around pick-up and release that may help address this issue as well.
- ∨ How wide is the strip of land between the bottom of the wall below the play area and the neighbor's property line? Can there be a pathway that can connect the City sidewalk directly to the paved part of the schoolyard? (Original thought was to allow this space to be a cut-through).
 - ∨ (CBA) There may be enough space to make a pathway, but there is a significant grade change that would need to be negotiated where the path would meet the retaining wall. There are also trees in that area; paving in that zone would damage the tree root systems.
 - ∨ (City) It could be a security concern for people to bypass the main entrance through the playground and directly access the other part of the schoolyard. We don't want

to encourage people to cut through the schoolyard when school is in session. Additionally, the trees provide valuable green space and shade in this area. We may remove trees that are undesirable/invasive species, but City wants to try to maintain as much canopy as we can.

- ∨ There should be more bike parking for kids biking to school.
- ∨ Councilor Ballentyne is working with the Mobility Task Force to put more racks at the front of the school.
- ∨ (CBA) We can also include more racks at the back of the school so that kids coming in from that entrance don't have to go all the way around the school to park their bikes.

Hard Court Sports Areas:

- ∨ Comment: Like the idea of keeping hard surface court areas for basketball.
- ∨ There was a request that if there would just be one basketball hoop, that it should at least be a full size half court with a key and a three-point line, since the court is used frequently after school hours by older kids and adults.
- ∨ Comment: Like some hard-court surfaces and it's generally understood that some paving will be necessary to allow fire truck access and dumpster pickup.
- ∨ Paved space for four-square and kickball is a high priority for the school community.
- ∨ Is there a particular reason that most play courts are oriented East-West rather than North-South? The design team should think about the direction of balls going back and forth and how that interfaces with other school activities and entrance circulation.
- ∨ (CBA) The courts were mostly oriented to allow circulation patterns; otherwise no particular reason for orientation. We will explore this further as we develop design options.
- ∨ (Councilor Ballentyne) It's important to consider the location of basketball carefully.
- ∨ If there is only one basketball hoop, there's a desire for it to be adjustable so that younger kids can use it too.
- ∨ (CBA) We can look at making this hard court area less scripted and more flexible, for example, including multi-sport goals such as at North Street Park, or multi-sport striping like the paved area at Morse-Kelley Playground.

Bike Safety Program:

- ∨ Whatever circulation path gets designed for the bike safety program should be designed to prioritize day use by the school.
- ∨ (Councilor Ballentyne) Likes the idea of a bike loop; both of her daughters learned to bike at the school. The schoolyard provides a safe enclosed space for this activity.

Artificial Turf:

- ∨ There was a question about the funding structure for a possible artificial turf field. The City and CBA explained that while CPA funding cannot be used for artificial turf design, the City has procured separate funding designated for athletic area design (whether the final design ends up including artificial turf or not).
- ∨ **Is it possible to have a climbing wall utilizing artificial turf as the safety surfacing below it?



- ∨ (CBA) Probably yes. Different artificial turf systems are designed with different “fall heights” in mind. There are systems that have a deeper cushioning layer that can be used under play equipment. We would have to speak with our turf consultant about the best way to design this feature.
- ∨ Someone commented that even a smaller “practice size” artificial turf area [rather than a standard field size] would be better than nothing, and would be well-used.
- ∨ There was general support for an artificial turf area.

Climbing Walls:

- ∨ In past feedback sessions, climbing wall handholds have been identified as a top priority.
- ∨ There was strong support for the climbing wall idea at this meeting from several attendees (and students, especially 4th graders, by proxy).
- ∨ ** See related comment about turf underneath climbing walls.

Play Equipment:

- ∨ There were a lot of requests for more swings at the school.
- ∨ (Comment) If swings are incorporated, dish swings would be better than individual swings because more kids can use them at recess and won't have to wait to use limited individual swings.
 - ∨ (City) Dish swings can also be used by many kids with mobility issues, although there are circumstances where only a full ADA swing is appropriate.
- ∨ (Comment) Can we incorporate swing platforms that you can roll a wheelchair onto?
 - ∨ (CBA) These swings are often used on private property or at specialized play spaces, but these swings don't meet the current safety regulations for play equipment in public spaces.
- ∨ (Councilor Ballentyne) Students advocated for climbing walls, monkey bars, swings, and a climbing structure.
- ∨ (Councilor Ballentyne) There should be a natural space with sensory materials, sand, other natural materials for kids to experience.
- ∨ (Comment) Love the log climbing structure at Hoyt Sullivan Playground.
- ∨ Any feature (changes in grade, stepped walls, etc) can be used for play. Create a flexible, multi-use space.
- ∨ At ESCS, students run up and down the hill. Can we introduce topography and different levels?
 - ∨ (City) Arn cited the example of the “rubber hill” at the Kennedy School (designed by CBA).
- ∨ (Comment) The flatness of the space is an impediment to play.
- ∨ Request for some “messiness” and opportunity for interaction with natural materials.
- ∨ Can we create a separate/different play experience for some kids? There should be safe passage away from active sports, with less exposure.
 - ∨ (CBA) We will work on developing spaces that offer protection or separation for kids that prefer quieter activities. This was also a request from teachers.
- ∨ (Comment) Dislikes North Street Park, “you can tell it was designed by an adult”. Perception that there wasn't enough community input for the design of that park.



- ✓ (City and Councilor Ballentyne) There was a pretty extensive public process for this park. It was designed to address the needs of older kids and teenagers, who came to the meeting and requested activities for them to use.
- ✓ (Comment) Joey's Park in Belmont is an excellent playground, designed by kids. There is a wood xylophone with no designated mallets, which is a great feature. The park is huge and there is a lot of imagination incorporated into the design.
- ✓ (CBA, post-meeting) This park's Friends Group has a website: <http://joeyspark.org/>
- ✓ (Comment) Would the school consider having recess before lunch?
 - ✓ (Principal Seward) This is done for parts of each grade; difficult to manage with complicated lunch schedule.
- ✓ (Comment) There is a preschool based at a nearby church that comes to WSNS to use the play equipment nearly every day, it would be good to include something they can still use.
- ✓ (Comment) Love the hillside play equipment, especially the hill slide.

Upper Parking Lot:

1. (Councilor Ballentyne) Can we use the upper parking lot as a schoolyard space? The City is doing a Parking Study to assess how the resources of street parking and parking lots are being used and to see how they can reconfigure or reallocate parking in a more efficient way. Councilor Ballentyne would like to challenge the Task Force to think more critically about this neighborhood to see if we can dedicate school property for use by the school and children rather than for storage of vehicles. She prefers to see plans for redevelopment of both the upper and lower spaces. The Somervision goals call for the City to acquire open space for use by the public.
 - ✓ Other residents commented that hardly anyone parks on Curtis Street during the day, perhaps teachers could be redirected to park there instead of in the lot.
 - ✓ (Comment) If teachers had an off-site parking lot to use (such as Dilboy), maybe the City could run a shuttle to the school from that location.
 - ✓ Pick-up and drop-off for after school program occurs at the upper lot. Voting also happens at this entrance.
 - ✓ (Comment) Maybe it's not all-or-nothing with the upper parking lot. Can there be a compromise between all of it becoming part of the schoolyard, and all of it remaining a parking lot? Perhaps over time the school can take over pieces of the lot in stages for student use. What would the upper lot become?
 - ✓ (City) We need to talk to the custodial staff about potentially putting the dumpster in the upper lot. We have also discussed putting trees in the unused corners of the lot.
 - ✓ (CBA) The upper lot could become more of what we are already planning. We can look at what we can do as the City finishes their parking study. CBA can master plan the site and consider what **could** happen at the upper lot. With the City, we can figure out what can be implemented there now and what can be implemented later.
 - ✓ Precedent for removing on-site parking for teachers: at the Brown School and Winter Hill School, parking for teachers is not available. Teachers park on the street with a business sticker.
 - ✓ Some parking issues for teachers include street sweeping, snow emergencies.
 - ✓ (Councilor Ballentyne) This should be about the kids and the school and

- reallocating resources to benefit them first.
- ∨ (Comment) Are there policy changes that could be made, such as not ticketing teachers during street sweeping?
- ∨ Is there a way to build below-ground or parking structure in the upper lot, while keeping space for kids to use?
 - ∨ (Councillor Ballentyne) It's prohibitively expensive to build parking structures of this kind on sites like this, based on past experiences / investigations.

Delivery and Trash Pick-up Access:

- ∨ Would it be possible to situate dumpster so that it is at the gate and helps make a barrier for runaway balls and kids? This way it wouldn't be in the middle of the schoolyard.
 - ∨ (CBA) This could pose an issue for fire access, but we can think about locating it so that it forms part of a division or barrier. Have to consider turning radius for trucks.
- ∨ Can we put the dumpster in the upper parking lot?
 - ∨ (CBA and City) Maybe. DPW and school staff have stated that it may not be practical to move trash through the school to the upper lot since the messiest trash comes from the kitchen. This would require further discussion with school staff.
- ∨ During the school day, kitchen deliveries etc. are made using handtrucks to bring supplies from the truck parked in the street.

General Comments:

- ∨ Kindergarten classrooms are next to the garden area at the front of the school, not near the current playground area. The current playground area is adjacent to administrative offices.
- ∨ What do shade and shadow patterns look like in the schoolyard?
 - ∨ (CBA) Current playground is shady most of the time, and the back schoolyard by the big wall and cafeteria doors is shady in the mornings but gets more sun later in the day.
- ∨ (Councillor Ballentyne) Would like to challenge for gender equity in determining the programming of the schoolyard – ask the kids, both boys and girls, what they want in their schoolyard. She met with 6 and 7-year old girls at the school to dream about what they wanted to see in the play space. She encouraged the community to also dream big about what could happen in the schoolyard space.
 - ∨ (City) Arn supported this comment and stated that the community should dream to give us ideas about what they want to see.
 - ∨ (Principal Seward) Would love to see a tree house at the school.
 - ∨ Another resident met with 5th graders, both girls and boys, and they asked for space to run around and play structures for older kids. She has letters from the students that she will send to Arn.
- ∨ (Comment) The City should buy the adjacent house that is for sale and incorporate the property into the schoolyard.
- ∨ Are there any all-weather features that can be used in rainy or snowy conditions? It should be a priority to get kids outside more often.
 - ∨ (CBA) If synthetic turf is incorporated, it will drain more quickly and snow will melt

- faster on it, allowing it to be used sooner. We can look into incorporating canopies or shade structures, but snow loads are a structural concern.
- ∨ (City) Arn stated that turf drains pretty well at ESNS, the snow cleared more quickly than in surrounding lawn areas.
 - ∨ Option 1 Comment: Concern about the flow of students being impeded at the beginning of the day, since primary access in the morning is at the cafeteria door.
 - ∨ Option 4 Comment: Request for amphitheater seating at the “outdoor classroom” area.

Gathering Spaces:

- ∨ What will be included in the “gathering areas”?
 - ∨ (CBA) These areas will include features that would be used the most by the school community, which could include different styles of seating, tables, and structures for shade. CBA will look to the school community for direction on the best way to furnish these spaces.
- ∨ Request for incorporating gathering spaces into the play areas.

Outdoor Classroom:

- ∨ There is already an outdoor classroom on the east side of the school with picnic tables and terraced plant beds. Do we need more outdoor classroom space?
 - ∨ (Principal Seward) The current classroom is located well, more outdoor classroom space is not necessarily a high priority. Classroom could be used more, sometimes teachers eat lunch there. Sometimes classes use the outdoor area with the garden beds at the front of the school, too. I prefer not to take up more schoolyard space for an outdoor classroom.
 - ∨ (CBA) The term “outdoor classroom” can refer to various types of spaces. It can be a space where there is seating to take a regular class outside. CBA has designed a lot of classrooms through the Boston Schoolyard Initiative Project, which identifies an outdoor classroom as a specialized curriculum space. However, these kinds of outdoor classrooms need teacher and school maintenance buy-in. It sounds like the school may not want an intensive outdoor classroom of this kind.

Neighbor Comments:

- ∨ Neighbor on playground side: Can the City share how much space there is between the playground retaining wall and the property line?
 - ∨ City and CBA will follow up with more information; site survey just came in a couple of days ago and is not yet in the base map for the designs.

