

# **Helping Johnny Walk to School in Pennsylvania: The Importance of Neighborhood Schools**

Findings from the  
Helping Johnny Walk to School: Sustaining Communities  
through Smart School Siting Policies Project  
September 2009

## Policy Task Force

Preservation Pennsylvania

AIA Pennsylvania

American Planning Association, Pennsylvania Chapter

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission

Pennsylvania Safe Routes to School

10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania

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National Trust for Historic Preservation  
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Preservation Pennsylvania

## **Overview of Project**

In May 2008, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, in cooperation with the United States Environmental Protection Agency launched the “Helping Johnny Walk to School: Sustaining Communities through Smart School Policies” project to encourage the retention and development of community-centered schools. Such schools use infrastructure and buildings that are already built, oftentimes share spaces for educational and recreational activities with the community, fit in well with the neighborhood, and are typically located in places which offer students an opportunity to walk or bike to school. While recognizing that school location decisions are made locally, we believe that state-level support—either by adopting new policies or removing existing policy barriers—can encourage local communities build or retain community-centered schools.

Through a competitive grant process, six states (California, Illinois, New Hampshire, Oregon, Pennsylvania and South Carolina) were selected to participate in a yearlong study to analyze statewide policies that affect school siting decisions and to make recommendations for policy changes that would encourage smart school siting and the reuse of existing school buildings. The Pennsylvania project is being led by Preservation Pennsylvania, the statewide non-profit historic preservation organization. A Policy Task Force formed to study this issue and has worked during the last year to produce the following findings and recommendations. Task Force members included the following organizations: AIA Pennsylvania, American Planning Association, Pennsylvania Chapter, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), Pennsylvania Safe Routes to School, 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania. In addition, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association provided valuable insight to the project.

## **Introduction**

With over 75% of Pennsylvania students riding the school bus, it is clear that Pennsylvania’s neighborhood schools and walkable communities are quickly disappearing. The cumulative consequences of abandonment and relocation are a serious issue in Pennsylvania.

During the past twenty-five years, Preservation Pennsylvania, AIA Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission and its partners on the Historic Schools Task force have successfully changed statewide policies concerning the rehabilitation of neighborhood schools and smart school siting.

Since 1992, Preservation Pennsylvania has annually published the *Pennsylvania At Risk* listing to draw attention to the Commonwealth's endangered historic resources. In 1998, the listing had a special focus to publicize the increasing visible abandonment and demolition of neighborhood schools. Since 1998, Preservation Pennsylvania has featured 65 historic neighborhood schools facing deterioration, abandonment or demolition. This number is only a small sampling of the many historic schools that have been affected and does not begin to cover the issue of where these new schools are located.

Also in 1998, Preservation Pennsylvania worked with the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation to successfully petition the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Basic Education Circulars to amend the regulation that required school districts to abandon older schools if renovation costs were more than 60% of the replacement costs. Preservation Pennsylvania also funded a study to examine the PDE statute that prohibited the renovation of "ordinary buildings" due fire safety concerns. "Ordinary buildings" are also called a brick-and joist structure. It has masonry-bearing walls but the floors, structural framework and roof are made of wood or other combustible material. When the study revealed no positive correlation between ordinary building construction and fire safety, the findings were presented to the PDE effectively influencing the deletion of the stipulation. In addition, the public policy efforts of Preservation Pennsylvania and the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation encouraged the PDE to establish a regulation that promotes the use of covenants by school districts selling former school buildings to avoid the demolition of historic neighborhood schools.

In 2004-2005, Preservation Pennsylvania worked with the PHMC to undertake a statewide comprehensive survey of historic school buildings and to develop a portion of the PHMC website specifically for the school preservation issue. It includes the survey data, the context statement on Historic Educational Resources of Pennsylvania 1682-1967, information about the Smart Growth Schools initiative including a listing of architects with experience in rehabilitating historic schools and designing smart growth schools as well as case studies and additional links. ([www.phmc.state.pa.us](http://www.phmc.state.pa.us))

In 2006, Preservation Pennsylvania teamed up with preservation advocates to form the Pennsylvania Historic Schools Task Force. Partners in this group included the Governor's Office of Policy and Planning, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. With the help of Thomas Hylton, author of *Save Our Land, Save Our Towns*, the task force published the booklet, *Renovate or Replace? The Case for Restoring and Reusing Older School Buildings*. The booklet urges school districts to consider the social, environmental, and economic advantages of retaining older neighborhood schools when exploring the need for new or upgraded facilities.

It included short essays from Pennsylvania's top level cabinet officers, including the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Community & Economic Development, the Secretary of Health, the Secretary of Transportation and the Secretary of Environmental Protection. It included several key issues: the misconception that Pennsylvania has school site minimum acreage requirements; the costs to renovate versus replacing existing schools facilities; the lifespan and embedded energy that older school buildings offer to communities; the environmental concerns associated with demolition, new construction and site development; the easy adaptability of existing neighborhood schools to 21<sup>st</sup> century instruction programs; and the significant sense of community established by neighborhood and community-centered schools. The booklet was distributed to all 501 school districts in Pennsylvania by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association and to 2,800 architects by AIA Pennsylvania, a Society of the American Institute of Architects.

With such a strong and long-time commitment to the issues of reusing historic and neighborhood schools and the more recent concern about smart school siting decisions, much progress has been made. There have been some key successes on individual school projects. However, Pennsylvania is still losing its neighborhood schools on an almost daily basis. Requests for technical assistance received by Preservation Pennsylvania are very often centered on a community's desire to both maintain and reuse a historic or older school building and/or a desire to have a school to which students can walk. The loss of these neighborhood schools is resulting in increasing numbers of large consolidated schools located outside of the communities they serve. Often they are built on former green fields resulting in the loss of agricultural land and open space. These new schools require additional bus routes and sometimes, the improvement and building of new roads, putting additional pressure on the municipalities that are responsible for construction and maintenance of these roads.

## **Background**

With the establishment of the Pennsylvania Common School System Act of 1834, all decisions relating to school facilities are at the discretion of the individual school districts. Pennsylvania's Department of Education (PDE) offers reimbursement assistance to districts for both rehabilitation and construction projects. The PDE reviews all rehabilitation plans in second, third, and fourth-class districts.

Over the years, the guidelines have been misinterpreted where it is thought that historic schools cannot meet current construction codes or educational regulations. However, school construction projects involving historic buildings have successfully received reimbursement from the Commonwealth through a process known as PlanCon.

PlanCon, an acronym for Planning and Construction Workbook, is a set of forms and procedures used to apply for Commonwealth reimbursement.

Through the PlanCon process, school districts are required to submit a project justification that takes into consideration "buildings, structures, site conditions or site features [that] are more than 50 years old..." Furthermore, PlanCon's "Part A: Project Description" states that "School districts should take all reasonable efforts to preserve and protect school buildings that are on or eligible for local or national historic registers. If for safety, educational, economic, or other reasons, it is not feasible to renovate an existing school building; school districts are encouraged to develop an adaptive reuse plan for the building that incorporates a historic easement or covenant to avoid the building's abandonment or demolition."

The PDE does not favor new construction over renovations of existing buildings; in fact, over 80% of school construction projects that are reimbursed by the PDE involve work on existing buildings. Districts are reimbursed for a portion of projects up to a certain limit and cannot receive reimbursement for multiple projects on the same building within 20 years, often called the 20-year rule. This regulation tries to encourage school districts to think in terms of long-range facilities planning. An encouraging fact for historic school buildings is that the Commonwealth provides the same level of base reimbursement for renovations or alterations as for new buildings. Additional funding is available for certain types of projects. However, because renovations or alterations to an existing building are usually less expensive than new construction, the proportion of reimbursement is usually greater for work on existing buildings than for new buildings.

While the policy does state that school districts must consider existing historic buildings, the reality is that some school districts dismiss this consideration and move directly into new construction. This policy can be made stronger to not only require that school districts fully consider rehabilitation prior to committing to new construction but to demonstrate that rehabilitation is not feasible before a decision is made to proceed with new construction. If the school district chooses new construction, policy should help ensure that the new construction is compatible with the neighborhood in size, design, scale and materials. In either case, rehabilitation or new construction, policy should encourage at least the use of green technologies and sustainability.

Additionally, many school districts do not perform needed maintenance projects because there is no reimbursement policy for the work. Existing school buildings that are regularly maintained and upgraded can provide a long-term use as a school including state of the art educational standards at less cost than new construction. If a school district has been regularly maintaining their buildings, a major renovation, when needed, will be more feasible. Waiting until the building is in such bad condition that

rehabilitation is difficult or too expensive results in the loss of many otherwise well-constructed, though poorly maintained, buildings.

A review of the PDE's Basic Education Circulars revealed school districts are often motivated to forfeit preventative maintenance and small-scale adaptive reuse renovations because of prohibitive costs. In addition, many technological and electrical upgrades, ADA/IDEA improvements, windows, roof repair and minor renovations are considered by the PDE as non-reimbursable projects. As a result, school district administrators may forgo non-reimbursable projects for the sizeable financial incentives offered for demolition, new site acquisition, and new construction.

In 2001, the Pennsylvania School Board Association asked school district administrators to rank the top reasons for choosing new construction over renovation. The top reasons for planned construction included: technology additions, age of existing facilities, inadequate instruction space in existing facilities, security and safety, and IDEA/ADA compliance. Planned construction certainly offers a costly solution to these administrative demands; however, preventative maintenance, classroom additions, and minor renovations to existing buildings (if funded by state reimbursements) provide a more cost-efficient and resource sensitive solution.

To foster the adoption of a statewide policy that distinguishes schools as an integral aspect of traditional community development, there must be a consideration of the fiscal, social, and environmental impact of abandonment and demolition of neighborhood schools. For example, the PDE funding formulas do not equate the additional expenditures required for transporting students to schools outside of their neighborhoods. In the fiscal year 2006-2007, over 1.26 billion dollars was spent statewide on school bus transportation. In the 2008-2009 Budget the state subsidy (approximately 50% of the pupil transportation costs) increased by 4.42%. This figure is expected to rise significantly over the next several years. Unfortunately, other indirect consequences to the environment, community character, and student health associated with new site development are less tangible. To redirect the cycle of older school abandonment, school district administrators need to consider the cumulative or indirect effects of school siting policies.

Walkable neighborhood schools are a vital part of thriving communities. Neighborhood schools serve as an anchor to these communities, creating relationships among its residents and serving as a meeting place for community events. The pride associated with these schools where generations of residents have attended class become a part of the community's identity.

Pennsylvania has lost hundreds of neighborhood schools over the last thirty years. In most cases, several schools in one district have closed and been replaced by large

mega-schools requiring busing of students who previously walked or biked to their neighborhood schools. New larger schools are built on land that was previously agricultural or open space. These new larger schools are then surrounded by sprawling suburban neighborhoods which eliminate additional agricultural and open space land. The loss of neighborhood schools is devastating to traditional towns and existing neighborhoods.

## **The Current Task**

The Policy Task Force for the *Helping Johnny Walk to School: Sustaining Communities through Smart School Siting Policies* project has undertaken the study of the barriers and policies that affect the reuse of older school buildings and the siting of new schools during the past year (September 2008 – September 2009). Using a combination of existing studies, publications and other materials as well as the individual expertise of the Task Force members and their agencies, the following findings have been developed. First, there is a listing of the barriers to the retention and development of neighborhood schools. Following the “Barriers” section are two sets of recommendations that address this issue; one on policy changes and the second on education. The work produced as part of this study outlines the major barriers and recommendations to address those barriers. The findings are a starting point for advancing the issue of retention and development of neighborhood schools.

## **Barriers to the Retention and Development of Neighborhood and Community-Centered Schools**

### ***1. Renovate or Replace Decisions are Local***

With 501 independent school districts in Pennsylvania managed by locally elected school boards, it is difficult to make any major changes to the way these local decisions are made. While information can be provided on a case by case basis as local advocates become involved, the ultimate decision rests with the school board itself.

Without a broad policy change at the state level, the average school district may not even consider rehabilitation versus new construction unless there is public pressure to do so. Additionally, there is no requirement or even suggestion that new construction be located within walkable neighborhoods or in existing communities.

Governor Edward Rendell called for a consolidation of school districts in his 2009-2010 budget speech asking for a reduction in school districts to about 100. A task force has

been formed to study this plan. It is unlikely that the number of school districts will significantly affect the decision to renovate or replace. There may be an advantage to having fewer districts to manage and educate about the issue. However, there may be an increasing movement to construct larger consolidated schools that is a direct result of larger districts. In any case, the decisions will still be local.

## ***2. PDE Reimbursement Policies Allow Rehabilitation But Do Not Encourage It***

In 1998, a group of historic preservation organizations petitioned the PDE to amend the Basic Education Circulars to change the destructive regulation that required school districts to abandon older schools if the renovation costs were more than 60% of the replacement costs. This amendment resulted in a significant change that allowed rehabilitation to compete evenly with new construction for state reimbursement. Additional policy changes made at that time eliminated the stipulation that “ordinary buildings” could not be renovated and established a regulation that encouraged school districts to use covenants to avoid the demolitions of historic neighborhood schools after they were no longer used as schools.

These changes were important but only helped school districts who were seeking to reuse/rehabilitate an existing school or protect an abandoned school from demolition. It did not change the process by which school districts make their decisions. There is no enforced requirement that school districts fully examine the options. As long as all appropriate PlanCon documents are submitted, whether for rehabilitation or new construction, PDE reviews the request and approves it.

Additionally there are no incentives to encourage either the retention of an existing school or the location of a new school on an existing site, in an existing neighborhood or at a location where some portion of the students can walk or bike to school. If the goal of smart siting of schools is to either reuse existing schools or reuse existing sites, there should either be an incentive to do so or a disincentive to not follow these principles.

Related to this is the issue of incorrect information or wrong assumptions about requirements for rehabilitation and new construction. There is often a belief that rehabilitated schools cannot meet the required standards for reimbursement. For example, school districts often cite minimum acreage requirement as a reason for building on a large open site even though Pennsylvania does not have a minimum acreage requirement.

There is also a misconception that existing school buildings cannot be adequately rehabilitated to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century standards. Experience has shown that it is often less expensive to rehabilitate an existing school, and those schools can become state-of-the-art facilities for many years.

### ***3. Lack of Comprehensive Planning***

For many older communities, the school buildings are a cornerstone of the neighborhood. Children walking and biking to school has been a way of life for many years and, in some ways, a rite of passage. However, in today's communities most students are riding the bus to school. Schools are being located on large campuses with sports fields surrounding the school buildings and large parking lots for staff and students.

For most communities, zoning is used to separate land uses rather than building a true sense of place. Suburban development has pushed the need to keep children from walking to school. Residential uses are buffered from all non-residential uses. Public and private schools are usually allowed within these residential zones but usually by conditional use or special exception. Some communities have a separate institutional zone that even further separates schools from the residents they serve. Many suburban neighborhoods are built without sidewalks and bike paths.

In the planning process, often a community's comprehensive plan only includes a list of schools within the region but has little planning analysis and recommendations on school sitings and the impact of schools on community development. School districts often complete their planning and feasibility studies without the input from the local municipalities. This lack of communication between school districts and municipalities has lead to a blame game when new facilities are proposed or new developments proposed and there is a need for additional roads and municipal services that were not anticipated by the municipality.

### ***4. In Analyzing Rehabilitation versus New Construction, the Cost of Additional Bus Routes and Additional Time Riding on Buses is Usually Not Calculated***

The state of Pennsylvania greatly subsidizes the cost of busing and other transportation. As a result, the cost of adding bus routes and equipment is not considered when analyzing the cost of a new school. While this factor may not influence the decision to build in a walkable neighborhood, it should be considered for several reasons.

Pennsylvania is facing its most difficult budget years ever and is struggling to maintain even basic services. As more neighborhood schools are replaced by larger suburban schools, the cost of transportation continues to rise. Currently, 75% of public school students ride the bus to school each day. In the fiscal year 2006-2007, over 1.26 billion dollars was spent statewide on school bus transportation. In the 2008-2009, the state subsidy (approximately 50% of the pupil transportation costs) increased 4.42% and is expected to continually rise over the next few years. Consideration of this cost factor is important to the overall budget of the Commonwealth. NOTE: As of 9/30/2009, the

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has not yet passed a state budget. Therefore updated figures were not available.

### ***5. Lack of Safe Route to Schools***

In 1969, nearly half of all children walked or bicycled to school; however, in the subsequent decades, several factors conspired to decrease the percentage of walking students to only 15% by 2001. Similarly, the percentage of students that live within one mile of school that walk to school fell from 85% to 50% during the same period. This decrease in active transportation to school is part of a larger theme of declining physical activity in America's youth, which many associate with the current rise in childhood obesity.

There are many factors that have contributed to the marked decline in the number of students walking to and from school. Some cite the closure of neighborhood schools (in favor of larger school complexes) and suburban sprawl for separating students from their schools. But, these trends alone do not explain why students that do live within walkable distances are now less likely to walk to school than they were decades ago. Physical problems, such as a lack of safe, adequate, and accessible routes to school may limit student walkers. But, even in areas where students are close and infrastructure is adequate, students may be prohibited from walking to school by District policies that prevent students from walking due to safety concerns.

The Federal Safe Routes to School program was authorized in 2005. To date, Pennsylvania has awarded nearly all of its \$21 million allocation for the program. The future of the Federal Safe Routes to School program is contingent upon the reauthorization of the federal transportation bill, which is due in the fall of 2009.

### ***6. There is No Reimbursement Available for Large Maintenance Items within the Twenty Year Reimbursement Policy***

The Commonwealth will not reimburse school districts for alternation or renovation costs for any building that is less than twenty years old or for which a reimbursement project has been approved within the preceding twenty years. School districts do their planning based on this twenty year reimbursement rule. While this is a good standard for encouraging advance planning, it is a disincentive to regular maintenance. Some school districts may perform little to no maintenance during the twenty years between reimbursements virtually guaranteeing that the building is in terrible condition by the time each building is eligible. This "condition" is then cited as the reason the building must be replaced – it is too deteriorated to save.

Additionally, schools sometimes over design and over build in anticipation of population growth or additional needs since that building will not be eligible for another reimbursement for twenty years.

While there should not be reimbursement for routine maintenance items, the failure of a roof or a heating system or the need to upgrade technology could lead to the abandonment of a school building before it has exceeded its useful life. If there were some type of reimbursement available for larger system failure or system upgrades within the twenty year period, some school buildings would have a better chance of continued use.

### **7. *Inadequate Feasibility Studies***

Making a decision about renovating a historic neighborhood school or building a new one should be a factor in every feasibility study. A feasibility study of the issues should carefully evaluate the options. Unfortunately, the potential for renovation is sometimes dismissed without full consideration of the facts and the long-term implications.

PDE does not have required standards for feasibility studies and, in general, they tend to be an exercise in creating a document to support an already determined decision. There are no requirements to fully explore the reuse of an existing building before new construction is undertaken.

Potential problems persist including feasibility studies of historic schools conducted by architects who are inexperienced in rehabilitation, inflated and exaggerated cost estimates for renovation, limited or no community input, a bias against historic, hidden costs not accounted for, and minimal consideration for impacts to a community. A biased or incomplete feasibility study will not fully inform the general public or school district about all options.

### **8. *Disregard of the Keystone Principles***

In 2005, Governor Edward Rendell's Economic Development Cabinet developed the *Keystone Principles and Criteria for Growth, Investment and Resource Conservation* (Appendix I). The Keystone Principles are ten goal statements that aim for sustainable developments and are to be applied by all state agencies to guide the investment of state funds. A number of these principles can be applied directly to schools.

- REDEVELOP FIRST - Conserve Pennsylvania's exceptional heritage resources. Support rehabilitation of historic buildings and neighborhoods for compatible contemporary uses.
- PROVIDE EFFICIENT INFRASTRUCTURE - Fix it first. Use and improve existing infrastructure.

- CONCENTRATE DEVELOPMENT - Support infill and “greenfield” development that is compact, conserves land, and is integrated with existing or planned transportation, water and sewer services, and schools. Foster creation of well-designed developments and walkable, bikeable neighborhoods that offer healthy life style opportunities for Pennsylvania residents
- FOSTER SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES - Construct and promote green buildings and infrastructure that use land, energy, water and materials efficiently.

The principles and criteria were developed over two years by the Interagency Land Use Team, a working group of the Economic Development Cabinet. Governor Rendell revived and expanded the group’s assignment. The 23-member agency team was co-chaired by former DCED Deputy Secretary Kenneth Klothen and Joanne Denworth of the Governor’s Office of Policy.

The 10-agency agreement strengthens the ability of state agencies to consider and prefer projects that are generally consistent with local plans and ordinances. The agreement was developed by a consistency review committee of the Interagency Land Use Team chaired by John Dernbach, policy director of the Department of Environmental Resources. It is modeled on the policy developed by DEP to respond to the 2000 Municipalities Planning Code amendments.

Ten state agencies signed an agreement to apply these principles: the Departments of Community and Economic Development, Conservation and Natural Resources, Environmental Protection, Transportation, Agriculture and Education; the Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority; the Public Utility Commission; the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission; and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency.

The Keystone Principles make sense but almost five years after adoption, there is a general lack of application in most state agencies, even the ones that have signed the agreement to apply the principles. These principles could significantly impact school decisions in a positive way.

### ***9. Lack of Access to Successful Case Studies***

There are many excellent examples of successful case studies on both the reuse and rehabilitation of historic and older schools and the smart siting of schools within walkable neighborhoods. However, there seems to be a general lack of knowledge about the existence and location of these case studies. Many grassroots advocacy groups believe they are working alone and that there are no resources available to them to assist them in their battle.

Between October 2003 and December 2006, the PDE approved 33 new construction projects and 94 construction projects involving renovations and/or additions to existing

schools. All renovated school buildings were brought up to code and have the same life expectancy as a new school. The average cost per square foot of new schools was nearly twice the cost of renovations and additions, if all project costs were considered. New schools averaged \$212.99 per square foot and renovation averaged \$114.62 per square foot.

There is also a lack of understanding by both school districts and the public in general about sustainable and “green” practices. Most assume that a “green” or sustainable energy efficient building is a new building. Case studies that demonstrate that existing buildings are the best application of “green” principles are not easily accessible.

## **Policy Recommendations to Improve the Retention and Development of Neighborhood and Community-Centered Schools**

The following are recommendations prepared by the Policy Task Force to address the Barriers outlined above in order of priority as determined by the Policy Task Force.

### ***1. Require Consistency between School District Plans and Local/County Comprehensive Plans***

In order to better facilitate this process, there needs to be better coordination between the school district and the local and county governments to ensure that land use plans and ordinances actively consider the location of schools and construction of sidewalks and bike paths to facilitate walkability to the facilities.

In early 2009, legislation was introduced in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives that would require county, township and school districts to meet on a quarterly basis to discuss planning issues. This legislation was met with a great deal of objection. Pennsylvania has 67 counties, 2,566 municipalities and 501 school districts. It seems logical that this type of communication would greatly improve the coordination and consistency among these agencies.

### ***2. Create a Preservation Planner Position at the PDE***

PDE must provide more leadership and guidance as school districts work through the PlanCon process. School Boards can be led by consultants who act as experts in the field even though some may lack the knowledge necessary to fully explore renovation versus replacement and school siting issues. A change in policy is needed to establish a professional position at the PDE who can review all PlanCon documents and ensure that all factors have been considered. This will also require a policy change in the process itself to give priority to retaining existing schools, smart school siting, and

sustainable practices. This goal relates closely to the need to ensure that all cultural, historic and environmental issues are reviewed before a final approval is given. Requiring early consultation and ensuring that ALL issues have been evaluated may result in the retention of an existing school or at least the careful siting of a new school.

The PDE planner can work to revise the existing PlanCon applications to be more in-depth and thought provoking about the issues related to the decision to rehabilitate or build new. The applications should then be carefully reviewed by the professional planner. Incomplete or insufficient applications should be returned and completed again with assistance from the PDE preservation planner.

### ***3. Require Full Consultation with PHMC before Proceeding with Design***

Many times, school districts do not consult with the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PA SHPO) early enough that any meaningful review or change in planning can be reviewed. Requiring early reviews before PlanCon applications are filed can accomplish several things. Primarily, if rehabilitation is being considered, consultation offer experts in the field of historic preservation to work with the school district architects to meet modern needs while retaining the essential historic character and features of the existing school buildings. Secondly, in the case of new construction, the PHMC staff can assist with design and siting decisions that most closely follow the best practices for smart school siting and sustainable practices.

### ***4. Allow for Certain Capital Maintenance Projects to Receive State Reimbursement***

There should be a change in policy that carefully defines the specific areas that would be eligible for reimbursement. This should not be used as a way to fund regular routine maintenance that every school district must undertake but should be designed as a way to help with a large expenditure (i.e. HVAC, technology upgrades, roofs) that have the potential to extend the life of an existing school.

### ***5. Develop Required Standards for Feasibility Studies***

Using the recommendations of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, a set of required standards should be developed for feasibility studies. These standards should be met before any state reimbursement is approved.

### ***6. Require all State Agencies to Adopt and Conform to the Keystone Principles***

*The Keystone Principles for Growth, Investment & Resource Conservation* set the focus on continuing efforts to encourage economic development that sustains and grows economies in urban, suburban and rural areas while at the same time conserving exceptional natural resources. If the *Keystone Principles* were followed by just the ten

agencies that agreed to implement them, many school siting issues would be easily addressed. There needs to be a stronger requirement that all agencies of the Commonwealth not just adopt these principles but apply them fully to all projects.

### ***7. Require School Districts to Prepare Full Facilities Plan***

PDE policy should be changed to require all school districts to complete full facilities plans every 20 years that completely evaluates all school buildings, student population projections, long term maintenance schedules and community needs. This facilities plan should be in place before individual PlanCon applications are considered for reimbursement and all state reimbursement requests should link back to the facilities plan.

## **Recommendations to Educate Decisions Makers to Improve the Retention and Development of Neighborhood and Community-Centered Schools**

### ***1. Continue to Collect and Disburse Successful Case Studies on both Rehabilitation and Smart Siting Issues***

There should be an extensive collection of successful case studies developed that cover a variety of issues – rehabilitation of existing school facilities, new additions that are compatible in design, new school siting that maintains the neighborhood school location, the use of funding that encourages walking and biking. This information should be included in all training – school board members, architects and legislators – and should be easily accessible to everyone interested in school decisions. It should also be easily available, accessible and downloadable on various websites including Preservation Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. It should also be made available in a print version that can be distributed as requested.

### ***2. Continue to Educate Legislators and Agency Officials about the Importance Neighborhood Schools***

An educational summit will be developed to be offered initially in the spring of 2010 to help legislators understand the importance of neighborhood schools in the overall vitality and success of our communities. A key component of this training will be a presentation of the key recommendations of this project to begin the process of changing policy that will make a difference.

### ***3. Offer Training for School Board Members on the Neighborhood School Issue***

Because the final decision to renovate or replace rests with the local school district, there must be educational opportunities available to school board members and administrators on the factors affecting the retention and development of neighborhood schools. Providing this type of information to the school districts directly in the form of booklets or other resources has not proven to be effective. It is recommended that information and training be offered to each school district, school board and administrators directly or through the Pennsylvania School Boards Association. Using informational exhibits or presentations at conference, this information should be easily accessible to all.

Topics should include the full explanation of the PlanCon process incorporating all policy changes recommended that encourage a full consideration of the options, the purpose of full facilities plans, the requirements of a good feasibility study, a clear explanation of the many misconceptions that exist about rehabilitating existing schools and requirements for new schools, the value of neighborhood schools and their effect on communities and the value of developing safe walkable and bikeable routes to schools including the advantages of this and the funding that is available.

### ***4. Continue to Educate Architects on Reuse of School Buildings***

It is recommended that training similar to that suggested for school districts with specific emphasis on sound preservation practices, sustainability for existing buildings and the siting and design of new buildings. The list of architects who have successfully rehabilitated school buildings or have experience with smart growth school siting is available on the Pennsylvania Historical Museum Commission website. This list should be updated frequently and made available as a resource to school districts.

## **Next Steps**

As this yearlong project draws to a close, there is still much work to do. The Policy Task Force has been working through the past year at a time when it was difficult to get any legislators or administration to focus on anything other than the Commonwealth Budget. In fact for most of the time period of this project, little else has been accomplished in state government. As of September 30, 2009, there is still no state budget in place. What is known about the budget is that severe cuts have been proposed including a serious reduction in PDE staff responsible for reviewing PlanCon documents. In addition, since no budget is in place, school districts began their 2009-2010 school year without their state allocations, causing a severe hardship and forcing

school districts to eliminate positions, reduce curriculum offerings and eliminate or reduce extra-curricular activities.

As a result many of the planned activities for this project have not taken place yet. Moving forward, the Policy Task Force is committed to continuing this important work by undertaking the following activities:

- Launch a public information campaign to increase visibility of the historic school/school siting issue statewide.
- Hold a policy summit to review the findings of this study and to obtain feedback on the recommendations.
- Hold a press conference to announce findings and recommendations
- Present sessions on the topic at various statewide conferences: Heritage, Main Street, Planning, AIA and School Boards.
- Have informational displays at the above-referenced conferences
- Launch a website page to provide information about the topic and offer a toolkit of resources to be used by school districts, elected officials and citizens.
- Work with AIA Pennsylvania to hold an educational summit for members of the House and Senate Education Committees and their staff members on Smart Growth Schools
- Work with 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania and Good Schools PA on their partnership with the Southeastern PA First Suburbs project to develop a common policy agenda to identify the most significant factors causing disinvestment in older communities
- Continue to advocate for legislation that encourages/requires coordination between counties, municipalities and schools districts
- Begin work to implement some of the recommended policy changes by meeting with PDE officials

## Appendix I

### COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA KEYSTONE PRINCIPLES FOR GROWTH, INVESTMENT & RESOURCE CONSERVATION

#### PREAMBLE

The Keystone Principles & Criteria for Growth, Investment & Resource Conservation were adopted by the Economic Development Cabinet May 31, 2005. They were developed by the Interagency Land Use Team, a working group of the Cabinet over two years. The Principles & Criteria are designed as a coordinated interagency approach to fostering sustainable economic development and conservation of resources through the state's investments in Pennsylvania's diverse communities.

The Principles lay out general goals and objectives for economic development and resource conservation agreed upon among the agencies and programs that participated in their development. The Criteria are designed to help measure the extent to which particular projects accomplish these goals.

The Criteria do not replace agency program guidelines or criteria. Rather, at each agency's discretion, they will either be integrated into existing program criteria (preferable) or used as additional, favorable considerations in the scoring or decision making process. The Principles and Criteria are designed to encourage multifaceted project development that will integrate programs and funding sources from a variety of state agencies into a comprehensive strategy to address issues affecting whole communities. There are two categories of criteria:

*Core Criteria*, where relevant, should be given primary consideration in all investment decisions made by Commonwealth agencies when making grants or loans to public or private projects using agency funds.

*Preferential Criteria* should be used by Commonwealth agencies in all programs to which they are applicable to evaluate projects and make decisions on grants or loans using agency funds.

Projects are to be evaluated with the recognition that rural, suburban, and urban areas have different characteristics and needs, and that what might work in an urban area might not work in a rural area (the "Be Fair" standard).

The Cabinet also approved a process to implement the Principles and Criteria over the next six months during which each agency will determine how they will integrate the criteria into each of their programs. A committee of the Interagency Team, led by the Governor's Office, will review the plans and offer feedback with the goal of fine tuning the use of the Principles and Criteria for full implementation in the next calendar year.

## PRINCIPLES

1. **REDEVELOP FIRST.** Support revitalization of Pennsylvania's many cities and towns. Give funding preference to reuse and redevelopment of "brownfield" and previously developed sites in urban, suburban, and rural communities for economic activity that creates jobs, housing, mixed use development, and recreational assets. Conserve Pennsylvania's exceptional heritage resources. Support rehabilitation of historic buildings and neighborhoods for compatible contemporary uses.
2. **PROVIDE EFFICIENT INFRASTRUCTURE.** Fix it first: use and improve existing infrastructure. Make highway and public transportation investments that use context sensitive design to improve existing developed areas and attract residents and visitors to these places. Provide transportation choice and intermodal connections for air travel, driving, public transit, bicycling and walking. Increase rail freight. Provide public water and sewer service for dense development in designated growth areas. Use on-lot and community systems in rural areas. Require private and public expansions of service to be consistent with approved comprehensive plans and consistent implementing ordinances.
3. **CONCENTRATE DEVELOPMENT.** Support infill and "greenfield" development that is compact, conserves land, and is integrated with existing or planned transportation, water and sewer services, and schools. Foster creation of well-designed developments and walkable, bikeable neighborhoods that offer healthy life style opportunities for Pennsylvania residents. Recognize the importance of projects that can document measurable impacts and are deemed "most-ready" to move to successful completion.
4. **INCREASE JOB OPPORTUNITIES.** Retain and attract a diverse, educated workforce through the quality of economic opportunity and quality of life offered in Pennsylvania's varied communities. Integrate educational and job training opportunities for workers of all ages with the workforce needs of businesses. Invest in businesses that offer good paying, high quality jobs, and that are located near existing or planned water & sewer infrastructure, housing, existing workforce, and transportation access (highway or transit).
5. **FOSTER SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES.** Strengthen natural resource based businesses that use sustainable practices in energy production and use, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, recreation and tourism. Increase our supply of renewable energy. Reduce consumption of water, energy and materials to reduce foreign energy dependence and address climate change. Lead by example: support conservation strategies, clean power and innovative industries. Construct and promote green buildings and infrastructure that use land, energy, water and materials efficiently. Support economic development that increases or replenishes knowledge-based employment, or builds on existing industry clusters.

6. RESTORE AND ENHANCE THE ENVIRONMENT. Maintain and expand our land, air and water protection and conservation programs. Conserve and restore environmentally sensitive lands and natural areas for ecological health, biodiversity and wildlife habitat. Promote development that respects and enhances the state's natural lands and resources.

7. ENHANCE RECREATIONAL AND HERITAGE RESOURCES. Maintain and improve recreational and heritage assets and infrastructure throughout the Commonwealth, including parks & forests, greenways & trails, heritage parks, historic sites & resources, fishing and boating areas and game lands offering recreational and cultural opportunities to Pennsylvanians and visitors.

8. EXPAND HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES. Support the construction and rehabilitation of housing of all types to meet the needs of people of all incomes and abilities. Support local projects that are based on a comprehensive vision or plan, have significant potential impact (e.g., increased tax base, private investment), and demonstrate local capacity, technical ability and leadership to implement the project. Coordinate the provision of housing with the location of jobs, public transit, services, schools and other existing infrastructure. Foster the development of housing, home partnerships, and rental housing opportunities that are compatible with county and local plans and community character.

9. PLAN REGIONALLY; IMPLEMENT LOCALLY. Support multi-municipal, county and local government planning and implementation that has broad public input and support and is consistent with these principles. Provide education, training, technical assistance, and funding for such planning and for transportation, infrastructure, economic development, housing, mixed use and conservation projects that implement such plans.

10. BE FAIR. Support equitable sharing of the benefits and burdens of development. Provide technical and strategic support for inclusive community planning to ensure social, economic, and environmental goals are met. Ensure that in applying the principles and criteria, fair consideration is given to rural projects that may have less existing infrastructure, workforce, and jobs than urban and suburban areas, but that offer sustainable development benefits to a defined rural community.