

CITY COUNCIL WORK SESSION

Portsmouth Middle School

March 28, 2007 – 6:30 p.m.

Eileen Dondero Foley Council Chambers

City Council Present: Mayor Marchand (left meeting at 7:00 p.m.), Assistant Mayor Ferrini, Councilors, Dwyer, Raynolds, Whitehouse, and Smith

City Council Absent: Councilors, Grasso, Pantelakos and Hynes

Officials Present: John P. Bohenko, City Manager; Robert Lister, Superintendent of Schools; Stephen Bartlett, School Business Administrator, Nancy Clayburgh, John Lyons, Kent LaPage, Sheri Ham Garrity, Brendan Ristaino, Mitchell Shuldman, Carson Smith, Ann Walker and Henry Clay Hayward, School Board members, and Dianne M. Kirby, Deputy City Clerk

I. Call to Order

At 6:35 p.m., Mayor Marchand called the work session to order and advised the City Council and members of the public that this meeting is for discussion on the Portsmouth Middle School.

II. Introduction

City Manager Bohenko advised the City Council that there would be presentations by Dr. Arthur Maerlender, Jr., from Dartmouth Medical School and Elizabeth A. Della Valle, with AICP followed by discussion and questions. City Manager Bohenko turned the meeting over to Councilor Dwyer for the introductions.

Councilor Dwyer stated that the Joint School Advisory Committee (JSAC) at several points tried to connect with Dr. Maerlender and bring him to a meeting. Unfortunately, this never happened. She stated that the JSAC thought it would be important to try to bring Dr. Maerlender to the community to continue the dialogue that was started at the JSAC meetings. She stated that Dr. Maerlender is the Assistant Professor at Dartmouth Medical School and he specializes in Child and Adolescent behavior health and psychiatry and Neuropsychology. She stated that what Dr. Maerlender brings to us is that he was co-principle investigator of the Commission on Children at Risk. She stated that he is going to talk to the Council and public regarding what are the basics for child well being currently in society. She stated that this subject seemed like an important foundation to the JSAC and that it is information that we all need to pay attention to no matter where we end up relocating the school.

III. Presentation by Dr. Maerlender, Assistant Professor, Dartmouth Medical School

Dr. Maerlender stated that one of every four adolescents in the U.S. is currently at serious risk of NOT achieving productive adulthood. He further stated that 21 percent of U.S. children ages 9 to 17 have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder associated with at least minimum impairment. The current generation of young people is more likely to be depressed and anxious than was its parent's generation and that twenty percent of students report having seriously considered suicide in the year 2003. He stated that this has lead to the development

of *Hardwired to Connect*, the *New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, National Commission on Children at Risk. He stated that in the midst of unprecedented material affluence, the mental and behavioral health of U.S. children is deteriorating due to our failure to recognize these broad environmental conditions that are contributing to the growing number of suffering children. He stated that in the *New Scientific Case*, the mechanisms by which we become and stay attached to others are biologically primed and increasingly discernible in the basic structure of the brain. He said that self-organization of developing brain occurs in the contest of a relationship with another self, another brain. He said that this relational contest can be growth-facilitating or growth-inhibiting, it imprints into the developing brain either resilience against or a vulnerability to later forming psychiatric disorders. He stated that a nurturing environment or the lack of one, affect gene transcription and the development of brain circuitry. He said that a social environment can change the relationship between a specific gene and the behavior associated with that gene and changes in social environment can thus change the transcription of our genetic material at the most basic cellular level. He explained that in the adolescent brain the frontal lobe changes – the frontal lobes are important for memory, voluntary motor behavior, impulse control, decision making, planning and other higher order processing. He stated that adolescents often “think too much”. He went on to state that the adolescent brain seeks “extreme” stimuli. He said that pushing the envelope is a need, not an attitude and the trick is to provide opportunities for “safe” stimulation such as through ritualized and proactive activities. He stated that adolescent differentiation happens at the brain and social levels, thus parents become less of a “direct” or immediate influence and teens seek others out to increase the probability of stimulation. He stated that adolescent development requires social interactions AND supervision and that is not necessarily by the parent. He stated that the HTC concluded that the cause of this crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness: a) a lack of close connections to other people, and b) a lack of connections to moral and spiritual meaning. He stated that Kids need to be connected to peers, adults, institutions, communities and values and meaning. He said that kids need to be seen as part of a community by members of the community and that they learn by watching when left to their own devices. He said that observation of the social world is EXACTLY what adolescents NEED to do in order to help the development. He said that kids need to observe and interact with adults in a natural setting. He went on to state that adolescents need to be supervised. He stated that children do fewer drugs, engage in less risky sex and do less violence when under adult supervision, but he stated that supervision includes arranging the environment, not just keeping eyes-on – although “eyes on is good too.” Dr. Maerlender asked why would we then isolate these kids – kids are our responsibility, in a sense, they are a community asset and so they “belong” to the various communities. He further asked why are schools important institutions to have in our Communities. He stated that they are important because a) we see the kids and their behavior b) kids see adults and their behavior c) kids participate in the community – visiting hospitals, nursing homes, police & fire more easily and d) being in the community means less busing, more walking, and less sprawl. He stated that the National Clearinghouse of Educational Facilities (1998) sites the six principles for planning schools as centers of communities are 1) enhance teaching and learning and accommodate the needs of all learners, 2) serve as a center of the community; 3) result from a planning and design process that involves all community interests, 4) provide for health, safety and security, 5) make effective use of available resources; and 6) be flexible and adaptable. Dr Maerlender stated that the learning environment should serve as a center of the community. He further stated that the evidence is clear that from brain development to Federal policy, environmental concerns, safety issues, and social capital, schools belong in communities. He said that the

questions should NOT be where should we put a school, but why would we put it any place but within a community

IV. Questions and Discussion

Assistant Mayor Ferrini opened the meeting up to questions for Dr. Maerlender.

Councilor Dwyer asked Dr. Maerlender concerning early adolescents vs. late adolescence is it good to have younger adolescence in a similar location facility with older adolescence. She asked if there is any research that suggests what age mixes are optimal. Dr. Maerlender stated that there is not any good research that has been done. He stated that what we are really talking about here is behavior, not necessarily brain development. He said the needs that younger adolescents have relative to older adolescents has a lot to do with their physical abilities and to some degree how well advance their cognitive abilities are so they are not as skilled as older adolescents, but is it bad to mix them, in his opinion no. He said what is bad is if they are not supervised appropriately, will the older adolescents take advantage of the younger adolescents, yes probably. Councilor Dwyer asked if the young adolescents are as thrill seeking as the older adolescents. Dr. Maerlender stated that he uses the phrase thrill seeking differently. He stated that from the brains point of view, the brain is looking for stimulation. He said what they need is stimulation, what they can handle is a lot different and what their choices are is different because of their younger age and what they are interested in. He stated that as they get older and more physically adept at managing thrills, you will see an increase in pushing the envelope.

Mr. Shuldman, School Board member, agreed with Dr. Maerlender, but asked if the school has to be in the center of town to be the center of a community. Dr. Maerlender stated that the important concept is for the kids to be a part of the community. He stated that some of the cost and benefits are not all money. He stated that social costs also have to be considered. He said kids are not well connected with the community today like they should be.

Mrs. Clayburgh, School Board member stated that the Kearsage Community is in the process of building a new middle school and they have decided to go into the outer parts of the town, is that correct. Dr. Maerlender stated that it is not even in the outer parts of town, there is nothing nearby. He said it is a rather extreme case. Ms. Clayburgh asked am I right that in Hanover they just built a middle school that was out of the center of town. Dr. Maerlender stated that it is out of the center of town, but it is still in an area that is part of the town. Ms. Clayburgh asked how many miles was he talking about. Mr. Maerlender said that distance is not the issue, the issue is do the kids have a connection to the community and the community to the kids. He stated that when a community has choices about where to place their schools, he stated that he would put his money on putting it in the community where you are going to maximize a lot more than putting it outside the community. He stated that in all the schools he has talked to, the social factors have never been considered. He stated that being a member of the community is part of education.

Mr. Lyons, School Board member asked if Dr. Maerlender had a chance to talk to the Principal of the Middle School in Portsmouth or anyone in the Educational Department. Dr. Maerlender stated that he did not. Mr. Lyons stated that he would like Dr. Maerlender to check out Portsmouth Schools. He stated that Portsmouth is already doing most of what he is talking

about. He asked Dr. Maerlender if he has been to the proposed sites. Dr. Maerlender stated that he has not. Dr. Maerlender stated that he is not here to argue for or against Portsmouth.

Assistant Mayor Ferrini asked Dr. Maerlender if he had a website. Dr. Maerlender stated that he did.

V. Presentation by Elizabeth A. Della Valle, AICP

Councilor Dwyer introduced Elizabeth A. Della Valle and stated that she will be taking a different prospective. She stated that as a planner, Ms. Della Valle has been involved with this issue in Maine and New Hampshire from a planning aspect. She is a director of the Maine Smart Growth Commission and this is why we have invited her here. She stated that our Community Planning Board has been particularly involved with American Neighborhoods and what the Great American Neighborhood is.

Ms. Della Valle stated that the first slide in her presentation was of the plan for Radburn NJ, which acted as an icon of planning and of planned communities. She stated that each of the three elementary schools in the area were specifically located at the center of a neighborhood so every child would be within a ¼ mile walk of an elementary school. She stated that she used this plan to point out that traditionally neighborhoods were proposed to be built around a school on purpose, even when communities like Radburn were purposefully designed as a suburb. She stated that the concept of a school at the center of a community was just basic and she is not sure when we lost this concept. She stated that it was probably sometime in the early 1970's with two concurrent trends, urban flight and the first Earth Day, from which conventional wisdom of an environmentally responsible community emerged to mean that everyone had to have a large lot with their home at its center, and that has been what we have been building ever since, with schools on a whole different scale and with a whole different model than the pattern of our history up to that point. She stated that there is a smarter way to grow and sustain a community as an antidote to urban sprawl. She said it is a model of community development that is different from the model of the last 45 years, one that is more consistent with the traditional pattern of New England communities – with schools as the traditional anchor of neighborhoods and downtowns, as a source of pride, for the community. She stated that schools can continue to form the core of our neighborhoods and downtowns by anchoring, and sometimes, restoring them. When existing schools must be placed by a site amid a remote Greenfield, they can serve as a magnet around which new neighborhoods can be built, but when there is little land around that Greenfield available for new residential development, they remain an important community institution, albeit isolated from the rest of the community. Ms. Della Valle stated that before the existing Middle School, which helps define and is supported by Portsmouth's community fabric is relocated; it is incumbent upon community leaders to ensure that all options to accommodate school needs in its present location are thoroughly explored. She stated that as with most Smart Growth issues, the decision about whether to renovate or build a new middle school is complicated and school facility planners are struggling with fiscal efficiencies, student performance, and programmatic changes over at least a 50 to 75 years lifetime of a school building, incremental changes in enrollment, and state acreage and classroom guidelines. She said that Municipal leaders are faced with community stability, downtown and neighborhood vitality, short and long term infrastructure and ongoing service costs, preservation of remaining valuable natural areas, and overall health of the community. She stated that she is the bearer of bad news – there is no

silver bullet to solve the dilemma Portsmouth faces, but rather the solutions are likely to be found in a careful balance of competing interests. Ms. Della Valle stated that while working with the Maine State Planning Office and the Department of Education she assisted with the preparation of a brochure to help communities and school boards grapple with this challenging issue. She stated that the brochure is called the ABC's of School Site Selection. She stated that where your middle school is located matters because a) schools are the heart of a community as well as centers of education, b) site location decisions can cost, or save, money over the long term, c) the location of a school can reinforce or work against a community's plans for future growth and development, downtown vitality, and environmental sensitivity and d) a school's location affects all citizens because it mirrors local values and pride. She stated that the brochure the ABC's of School Site Selection advises to a) Avoid sprawl. She stated that a community should first consider renovation. She said that the renovation option probably will require consideration of a variety of standards and guidelines established for contemporary school construction. She further stated that in exploring the renovation option, it would be wise to seek cost estimates from architects and engineers who specialize in school renovation, rather than relying on estimates from those who are more familiar with new construction as they are more likely to be familiar with the opportunities and pitfalls associated with renovating older school properties. She said to analyze the existing and proposed new site based on proximity to existing services, the downtown, established neighborhoods, and opportunity for growth of new neighborhoods. She said that nearby community facilities like libraries, art centers and museums can provide opportunities that might otherwise have to be provided by the school if it is located in a more remote location in the community. She also stated that students, parents, and staff are all more likely to partake of downtown services and facilities, simply because they are nearby and readily accessible. She said to use caution in selecting a site that is located in the geographic center of a community. She said the site may be equidistant from the borders of the town the potential for long term operational costs is significant if the site is located away from services and most highly populated residential neighborhoods. b) be site savvy. She stated that if an existing school is too small, consider siting playing fields on land close by, consider building up rather than out to help reduce site preparation costs and maximize playing fields and open space, consider limited parking, off site parking or shared parking, consider nearby properties that might be acquired and recycled for some school functions. She suggested selecting a site where students can walk or cycle to school and that is convenient for all modes of transport. She suggested avoiding sites that are only accessible by car or school bus as they can increase long term costs, increase environmental impacts, and reduce young people's opportunity to be physically active in their day-to-day lives. Ms. Della Valle stated that in addition to academics and physical activity, as young people grow, they require opportunities for independent activity in a safe environment and being able to walk unescorted to the dentist or to an after school violin lesson is an important education to consider alongside reading, writing, arithmetic, and soccer. She recommended the use of existing services and facilities, to save money and select a site that is served by good roads, an existing sewer system, public water, three phase power, nearby fire stations, public transit routes, and other essential services, and you won't have to pay more to provide them. c) Consult the community. Ms. Della Valle said to tap into community resources to help make and plan for this decision. She encouraged broad participation by inviting local planners, landscape architects, engineers, and other professionals to help. She stated that it is crucial to involve the local planning board and other committee members in the process and to avoid hasty decisions. She suggested consulting with experts to obtain professional expertise and receive a fair and equitable evaluation system that gives priority to the most

important selection criteria. Ms. Della Valle stated that a sustainable and smart solution to the Portsmouth's middle school issue will require a commitment to four important things: 1) Dialogue (between local school and planning interests, parents, the State, and many others), 2) Articulation of a community's vision of its future, 3) Research to identify and debunk long-held assumptions and myths that dictate the form of our schools and communities; and 4) A commitment to creatively solve the problems that virtually every site and situation will present. She stated that the effort necessary to tackle this problem will pay off in building a better, healthier community.

VI. Questions and Discussion

Assistant Mayor Ferrini opened the meeting up to questions for Ms. Della Valle.

Ms. Clayburgh, School Board member stated that on the question of the kids walking to school, she is concerned with this due to the recent articles in the newspaper about child predators located in the area. She stated that she is afraid to allow her children to walk to school and feels that there is a trend that kids not walk to school for these reasons. Ms. Della Valle stated that there are some reasonable concerns on this issue. She stated that if the kids are not walking to school, it is our responsibility to find a way to make it safe for our kids to walk to school. Councilor Smith stated that Traffic and Safety Committee has set up a Safe Routes to School Committee which will be taken up at the next City Council Meeting to become a formal committee.

Mr. Hayward, School Board member, stated that in Ms. Della Valle's slide on Radburn, New Jersey it looks like the schools were strategically put in certain sections of the city. Ms. Della Valle stated that Radburn was a new town and it was a fully designed community. She stated that it was designed in the 1920's. She further stated that it was never fully utilized as it was planned. Ms. Della Valle stated that she has recently heard that Radburn is looking into modifying again. She said it is an active community now. Mr. Hayward stated that it looked like the schools were placed on the sides as if they were in their own area of the town, but if you look at it closely, you see a lot of open space and it looks like each school has its State requirement of ball fields. Ms. Della Valle stated that she would guess it wouldn't meet contemporary standards. She said Radburn was a new town and the schools were built for neighborhoods to grow. She stated that unfortunately, Portsmouth doesn't have a lot of open space.

Mr. Lyons, School Board member stated that his first priority would be to put the kids first. He stated that when he walked to school it was a different world. He further stated that when you have a single High School or Junior High School you can't put them in the center of the neighbor. Ms. Della Valle stated that the ¼ mile walking distance from the school does talk to the elementary schools, but when they reach High School they are in a whole different time zone. She said they don't want to walk whereas the Middle School children are still a tipping point. She said they are not quite children but they are not quite adolescents. She said they are still forming their decisions about mobility. Ms. Della Valle stated that she is not pushing one way or the other for Portsmouth Schools; she is only getting the facts out to assist government and communities with putting their heads together toward a decision.

Councilor Dwyer asked Ms. Della Valle how you can bring a school to a community. Ms. Della Valle stated that you have to allow growth to develop. She said you need to have a mix of uses within the area such as stores, churches, apartments, homes etc. and be creative about the use of the land.

Kent LaPage, School Board Chair asked Ms. Delle Valle if Newington officials should be part of this discussion. Ms. Delle Valle stated that it was the cities decision whether they include Newington in the planning of the Middle School. Mr. LaPage asked Ms. Delle Valle if she thought it was a good idea to include them. Ms. Delle Valle stated that she thought it would be. Mr. LaPage stated that his main concern was the safety of the children.

Assistant Mayor Ferrini thanked Dr. Maerlender and Elizabeth Della Valle, for their presentations.

VII. Adjournment

At 8:15 p.m., Assistant Mayor Ferrini closed the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by:

Dianne M. Kirby, Deputy City Clerk