

WS
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City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: DECEMBER 3, 2002

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: PHILIP SUNDERLAND, CITY MANAGER *PS*

SUBJECT: T.C. WILLIAMS HIGH SCHOOL

At your request, made at the September 17 work session with the School Board on the construction of a new T.C. Williams High School, staff have reviewed a number of property sites in the City to determine whether they might serve as an alternative location for the construction of the high school. This memorandum summarizes the results of this review.

State Standards

According to the School Board Facilities staff, the minimum site requirement for the location of middle and high schools is 10 acres, plus one acre for every 100 enrolled students. With a planned enrollment of 2,500 students for T.C. Williams, the minimum site requirement would be 35 acres.

The current T.C. Williams facility sits on two parcels totaling approximately 28.5 acres. The school abuts Chinguapin Park which contains approximately 23 acres on three parcels. In order to meet the State minimum site area standards for schools, jurisdictions can count abutting public park area as part of the site, as was done for the Samuel Tucker School which abuts Boothe Park. The State can and does grant variances in those cases where the minimum site area standard cannot be met and there are no viable alternatives towards meeting the requirement.

It is unlikely that an alternative site for T.C. Williams that is smaller than the existing 28.5 acre site would obtain State approval. If anything, a site larger than the present one would be desired to meet the projected increased enrollment of 2,500 students and to come closer to the State standards.

Review of Sites

A review of sites in the City that are 10 acres in size and greater was conducted. Staff identified and reviewed 37 improved but underutilized sites of this size, where the land value is greater than the improvement value, and seven vacant sites. Staff also looked at the possible assemblage of improved industrial and commercial sites, which would produce a single assembled site of approximately 30 acres.

Underutilized Sites. Staff reviewed preliminarily the 37 identified underutilized sites. Many of these sites currently house schools, churches or other public institutions. The vast majority of the sites are under 15 acres in size and are zoned for commercial or industrial use. Public parks and open space comprise the majority of the sites over 25 acres in size.

A closer look at underutilized sites over 30 acres in size netted the following results:

- Ben Brenman Park (Site 2¹): The park consists of 46 acres, of which at least 40% is consumed by Cameron Lake. The relocation of T.C. Williams to this site would displace most of the recreation facilities now used by the public. Moreover, netting out the lake, the site is actually smaller than the present TC Williams site. Given the scarcity of open space to serve the west end of the City, this site would clearly be unsuitable as a location for T.C. Williams.
- Four Mile Run Park (Site 4): This is a 43 acre park, derived from the Four Mile Run Flood Control Project undertaken during the 1970s. As a wetland developed to absorb overflow from the Run, this site is not suitable for construction of a school or any building that would compromise the effectiveness of the flood control project.
- Jones Point (Site 5): Jones Point is a 62 acre national park owned by the federal government and is being partially used as right of way for the Woodrow Wilson Bridge replacement. The importance of this site for public recreation, its status as part of the national park system, its location in the far southeastern corner of the City, and its poor vehicular accessibility make this an unsuitable candidate for a new high school.
- Metro Service and Inspection Yard (Site 6): This is a 31 acre site owned by the WMATA and used for storing, inspecting and repairing Metrorail cars serving the Blue and Yellow rail lines. Although there has been consideration of air rights development over the yard, development of this site for a high school would be cost and functionally prohibitive. In addition, the site has poor accessibility to the City as a whole.
- Winkler Botanical Preserve (Site 7): This 44 acre site is owned by the Winkler Foundation and is used as a nature preserve and water control/quality facility serving a large area in western Alexandria. As a preserve and wetland, this site is not suitable for development.
- Episcopal High School (Site 8): This 107 acre site is already developed with a private high school and Episcopal Seminary, and is owned by the Episcopal High School. It is not seen as a viable site for the location of T.C. Williams. An adjoining vacant site is discussed later in this memorandum.

¹ The site numbers correspond to the numbered sites on the attached map.

- Fort Ward (Site 9): This is a 36 acre City Park and former Civil War fortress. It is an important contributor to the City's open space system and has considerable historic significance.

None of these sites is considered a viable alternative for the construction of a new high school.

Vacant Sites. Of the seven vacant parcels over 10 acres in size, five parcels are part of projects with vested zoning approvals, including Mark Center, Cameron Station and Potomac Yard. Reasonably, therefore, only two over-10-acre vacant parcels are even potentially viable from a size standpoint.

One site is at the Potomac Yard (Site 3). A 30-plus acre parcel could be carved out of the Potomac Yard just north of the existing Monroe Avenue Bridge. However, Potomac Yard at this juncture is long and narrow which would greatly constrain a school facility layout and connectivity. With the possible straightening of the Monroe Avenue Bridge, a site more suitable for a new elementary school than for a high school could be created at this location (a potential two acre school site adjoining the nine acre Simpson Field). Potomac Yard has concept plan approval, and land within the Yard would be very costly to acquire (certainly, at least on the order of \$20-30 million). Moreover, with many high school students residing in the western portion of the City, locating the City's sole high school in the east end would not be desirable.

A second site is a vacant parcel on Braddock Road at Howard Street that is owned by the Episcopal High School (Site 1). This site contains 32.4 acres, and is part of Episcopal High School, abutting its main campus. The site is directly across the street from Fort Ward Park and is bordered by single family homes to the south. The site area is larger than the existing T.C. Williams site.

About two years ago, City staff discussed this heavily wooded site with Episcopal High School representatives to determine whether the high school had any interest in opening a portion of the site to the public as an environmentally-protected open space. The school was unwilling to do so, even for a short term. Its representatives stated that they wanted to retain the site for more intense school use if ever needed in the future. School officials also expressed security concerns as it is their practice to not permit public access to their site unless for scheduled events. Acquisition of this land would, therefore, likely require condemnation.

Locating T.C. Williams at this site would present opportunities for shared facilities between schools (including the Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center) such as the Episcopal High football stadium which abuts this site. Not having to accommodate a separate stadium for T.C. on site would save money and reduce the amount of land needed by the high school.

From an environmental standpoint, the site is heavily wooded, and its development would cause the removal of most of the second growth trees on the site. The physical presence of the school would have an impact on the surrounding single family homes and cause an increase in traffic due to school buses, students and faculty driving, and visitors for special events.

There would be a substantial cost associated with acquiring this site. The assessed value of the site is now approximately \$12 million. The site is zoned R-20, Single Family Residential. With a development potential of about 50 homes (assuming 25% of the site for roads and \$300,000 land value per lot), the site could be worth about \$15 million.

Overall, and largely for environmental and cost reasons, this site is not seen as a viable alternative location for T.C. Williams.

Assemblage of Industrial/Commercial Sites. Staff reviewed the industrial and commercial sites along S. Pickett Street and Wheeler Avenue that are generally occupied by one story buildings. It was found that these sites, even if assembled, would equal 30 or more acres only by creating a long extended parcel that would be unsuitable for a school site. For example, the 15 acre Home Depot site would have to be combined with sites all the way from Edsall Road to almost Duke Street to equal 30 acres, an inappropriate configuration for a school facility, particularly along a commercial roadway. The entire Wheeler Avenue industrial area is only 37 acres in size. Assemblage of this property would require significant business relocation (the costs of which the City would likely bear), as well as the relocation of existing and planned City facilities. The assembly of a viable site for T.C. Williams from existing improved, and possibly underutilized, industrial and commercial sites is not seen as feasible.

Assemblage of Commercial/Residential Sites. Another option for a relocated T. C. Williams would be to acquire a combination of commercial and residential property to create sufficient acreage for a high school. One such example would be to acquire residential property near the corner of Beauregard and Seminary and then combine it with the City's existing property. One commercial establishment would also need to be acquired along with some open space from Washington House. Given the need (in this example) to acquire through negotiated purchase or condemnation some forty single home residential properties, this option is not feasible. It also would be costly. Other residential assemblages in other parts of the City could be envisioned, but all have the same, likely unacceptable actions of high cost and condemnation of City residents from their homes.

Conclusion

There are no feasible improved sites in the City -- either in the range of 30 acres in size or smaller sites that might be assembled into a single site in the range of 30 acres -- for the placement of T.C. Williams. Even if some of these sites were seen as somewhat feasible, they would not be superior to the current T.C. Williams site. In addition, they would require substantial funds to acquire.

There are only two vacant sites in the City of the required size that are possibly feasible for the placement of T.C. Williams. However, for the reasons outlined above, neither is superior to the current T.C. Williams site, and both would require substantial funds to acquire.

Finally, any acquisition of privately owned property would take currently taxable property off the tax rolls, and in many cases result in the displacement of business activity which could have negative employment and tax revenue implications for the City. (This assumes that if T. C. Williams was moved that the current property would remain publicly owned.)

Attachment: Map Underutilized and Vacant Sites over 30 Acres in Size

cc: Rebecca Perry, Superintendent
Jay Johnson, Acting Assistant Superintendent
Mark Jinks, Assistant City Manager
Eileen Fogarty, Director, Planning and Zoning
Kim Johnson, Division Chief, Planning and Zoning

