

powered by feet first



feet first policy

taking a stance to advance walkability

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School Siting

Policy

where we stand

Advocacy is a major component of the work Feet First does. These policy papers, prepared by our Policy Committee, convey Feet First's position on key issues of interest to increase safe and easy ways for people to choose to go by foot.



background

Trends indicate that the average school size has grown and that new schools have been increasingly located on large sites far from families in the neighborhoods that they serve. The National Center for Education Statistics notes that the number of schools in the United States declined from 262,000 in 1930 to 91,000 today, while student population has almost doubled. According to data from the National Household Travel Survey, in 1969 approximately 50% of elementary school students lived within two miles of their school; by 2001, only about 33% lived within this distance.

The goals of reducing transportation costs, encouraging students walking to school, and fostering neighborhood cohesion has prompted other states to revisit school siting policies that might work against these objectives. Oregon does not have minimum acreage requirements, and other states including South Carolina, Rhode Island, and Maine have eliminated their requirements. In addition, an increasing number of states are instituting policies that encourage shared use of school

Mission

who we are - what we do

Feet First promotes walkable communities and envisions people walking every day for their health, transportation, environment, community, and pleasure.



feet first
promoting walkable communities



School Siting

facilities and/or increased coordination between school districts and local governments on school facility siting and land-use planning.

why it matters to walking

New schools tend to be larger and built beyond walking distance of most students for a few reasons. Post-baby boom student populations are declining, prompting many districts in older, established communities to close schools and consolidate students in those that they keep open. And cash-strapped school districts in emerging communities close to the urban fringe often locate new schools in rural areas with lower land acquisition costs. However, while larger schools appear to benefit from economies of scale, rising transportation costs and uncertainty over state support for school yellow bus programs incur secondary costs that increasingly tap into district general funds. In addition, siting schools where they are only accessible by car exacerbates traffic congestion and safety issues during arrival and departure times. Careful consideration of transportation costs and related issues may provide a countervailing incentive for districts to locate new schools in a more central location.

To achieve the [Safe Routes to School](#) goal of getting more children to walk and bicycle to school safely, we must address school siting policies at state and local levels. Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is an important player in statewide site selection policy. The superintendent must review and approve all sites receiving state assistance. The OSPI's School Facilities Manual lists a number of factors that school districts and the superintendent must consider in choosing

a site, including proximity to community services such as libraries, parks, and museums, and general convenience for the majority of pupils.

These considerations tend to favor siting within urbanized residential areas, although the language is not strong or specific. Additional factors deal with students using public transportation and riding bicycles, but strikingly, safe and convenient walking access is not listed as a consideration. The School Facilities Manual also includes minimum acreage standards based on the estimated population of the school, which tends to encourage districts to build larger schools.

The Washington Growth Management Act (GMA) requires cities and counties to designate urban growth Boundaries (UGBs) within which growth should be concentrated. Although the law does not explicitly require locating schools within UGBs or rural towns, school facilities outside UGBs requiring water and/or sewer service may need extraordinary measures such as service lines dedicated solely to (and paid for by) the school district.

In King County, the School Siting Task Force provides an excellent model for how other counties can adopt policies to ensure that new schools are sited properly. The Task Force unanimously concluded that future schools should be sited in urban areas or rural towns and made recommendations on whether specific properties were suitable for development, land swaps, or public acquisition. The Task Force also recommended that school districts participate in planning bodies like the Growth Management Planning Council and the Puget Sound Regional Council.



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School Siting

feet first position

Feet First urges all counties to undertake efforts, like the King County School Siting Task Force, to systematically evaluate potential future school sites and adopt policies encouraging locating schools within easy walking and biking distance of their students as much as possible. The OSPI School Facilities Manual should be amended to remove minimum acreage standards, as other states have done, and the language should be edited to more strongly encourage siting within urbanized residential areas. The manual should also add student walking access as one of the factors to be considered when choosing school sites. The proposal to build a public school in Downtown Seattle, where available land is severely limited, could provide an opportunity to argue for eliminating the statewide minimum acreage requirements.

resources

OSPI's Facility Siting Guide:

<http://www.k12.wa.us/SchFacilities/Programs/SchoolFacilitiesManual.aspx>

King County School Siting Task Force:

<http://www.kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/constantine/initiatives/school-siting-task-force.aspx>.

Safe Routes to School National Partnership school siting page: <http://www.saferoutespartnership.org/state/bestpracticesschoolsiting>.

The State of Oregon siting handbook:

<http://www.oregon.gov/LCD/TGM/docs/schoolsitinghandbook.pdf>.

Maine State Board of Education and State Planning Office report "Making Schools Important to Neighborhoods Again" calling for eliminating minimum acreage standards:

<http://www.maine.gov/dact/municipalplanning/docs/schoolrpt2001.pdf>

A Pennsylvania resource on renovating versus replacing schools: <http://www.saveourlandssaveourtowns.org/savingschools.html>

EPA school siting guidelines:

<http://www.epa.gov/schools/guidelinestools/siting/>

EPA report, Travel and Environmental Implications of School Siting: http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/pdf/school_travel.pdf

Schools as Centers of Community, A Citizen's Guide for Planning and Design: http://www.ncef.org/pubs/scc_publication.pdf.

