



feet first

promoting walkable communities

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March 21, 2017

Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee Members
Washington State Legislature
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Members:

Feet First is a statewide nonprofit organization representing people of all ages who need safe, accessible, and inviting ways to go by foot. Walking is a vital transportation mode, which strengthens communities, reduces pollution, and promotes good health. Since 2001, we have worked to ensure all communities in Washington are walkable. We urge your **opposition** to **ESHB 1017**, which allows certain counties to permit schools outside of designated urban growth areas when specified criteria are met.

The location of schools is one of the most important decisions a community will make. If a child lives close to their school, there is a significantly better chance that they will walk to class every day. However, when new schools are moved far away from where they live, they will almost certainly arrive by bus or car. The Institute of Medicine cites the decrease in walking and biking to school as one of the major contributors to childhood obesity, which has tripled for school-aged children over the last three decades. Studies also show that students arrive at school better prepared to learn when they get exercise walking to school in the morning.

Schools also play an important role as the community's focal point. Parents meet each other while taking their children to school. Neighbors bump into each other while walking their dogs on the school grounds. Grandparents attend the school play and recognize a friend from long ago. Through these informal interactions, social networks are formed strengthening a support system for children and feel more connected to their community.

Furthermore, **ESHB 1017** may actually cost school districts more money in the long-term. Although land acquisition costs are generally lower in rural areas, any cost savings are offset by higher school transportation costs. Nationwide, the cost of transporting students to and from school has risen significantly as school sites have become less community-centered and located farther from the neighborhoods they serve. In addition, siting schools where they are only accessible by car exacerbates traffic congestion and safety issues during arrival and departure times.

This bill weakens the Growth Management Act (GMA). The GMA developed clear criteria about what is and isn't allowed in rural areas located beyond the Urban Growth Boundary. This bill effectively allows school districts to override land use decisions made by county authorities. The GMA has been successful at promoting responsible growth; **ESHB 1017** would be a big step in the wrong direction.

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 and cost-effectively. 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.

As an alternative to **ESHB 1017**, the state might consider revising minimum acreage standards for new schools in the Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction's School Facilities Manual. Other states, including South Carolina, Rhode Island, and Maine have eliminated acreage standards to reduce school construction costs and facilitate school siting in urban areas. The manual should also add student walking access as one of the factors to be considered when choosing school sites.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Maggie Darlow".

Maggie Darlow,
President, Feet First