



May 20, 2009

Mr. Tom Boasberg
Superintendent, Denver Public Schools
900 Grant Street, Suite 701
Denver, CO 80203

RE: West Washington Park Neighborhood Association Position on Byers School

Dear Mr. Boasberg:

We are writing to you regarding the future of Byers School, which as you are aware is located in West Washington Park. West Washington Park, and the surrounding East Washington Park and Baker Neighborhoods, are primarily composed of single family homes. These stable neighborhoods are home to a steadily increasing population of families with children.

Background

The West Washington Park Neighborhood Association (“**WWPNA**”) is a registered neighborhood organization. On behalf of the over 6,500 residences in our community alone, we have an important stake in public schools. Members of WWPNA have been actively participating in the process for evaluating school properties since April, 2008, when Denver Public Schools (“**DPS**”) retained the Urban Land Institute (“**ULI**”) to assess properties. However, WWPNA’s strong support of our neighborhood schools long preceded this. We have been involved with Lincoln School for many years, and our support goes beyond sending our children to this school. In fact, WWPNA monetarily supports the school with donations.

As DPS begins its final deliberations regarding the fate of the Byers School, on behalf of families in our neighborhood and the surrounding communities of East Washington Park and Baker, we ask you to consider the following.

1. November 2003 Bond Issue.

In November, 2003 Denver voters approved a general bond for DPS to renovate facilities. Byers School was prominently featured in the media campaign designed to induce voter support for this initiative. In fact, Byers was scheduled to receive more than \$8 million from this bond issue for renovation. Failure to retain Byers for longer-term use as a school would constitute a serious breach of the public’s trust.

2. **Future Needs of the Community for Public Schools.**

WWPNA has reviewed in detail the DPS study summarizing the results of its internal review of assets, as presented at the April 2009 Board of Education meeting. We strongly disagree with the preliminary comments of DPS staff that Byers School will not be needed to meet future school demands. The population of families with school-aged children in our neighborhood is rapidly increasing, as evidenced by enrollment at Lincoln Elementary. In 2003, Lincoln Elementary was operating at 60% capacity. A mere five years later, Lincoln is operating at 93% capacity. Collectively, southeast Denver elementary schools operate at 116% of capacity.

DPS indicated that current utilization rates for junior and senior high schools in southern Denver are at 50% and 82% capacity, respectively. Importantly, these percentages include schools that are more than five miles from Washington Park. If these outlying schools were excluded from this assessment, we believe the utilization percentages would be much greater. In fact, it is easy to discern that when the students of Lincoln and Steele Elementary schools matriculate, capacities at our local junior and senior high schools will correspondingly increase. Additionally, the numbers do not include the high density redevelopment of three Transit Oriented Development sites (totaling 120 acres) situated around the Alameda and I-25/Broadway Light Rail Stations, which will add thousands of homes to the immediate area.

DPS staff suggests that the future needs of our communities for junior high schools could be met by alternative schools. In considering this proposition, we note that the schools identified for this purpose are situated west of I-25. We believe this is an untenable resolution to meet the demands our growing student population. For the last five years, WWPNA has been heavily involved in planning initiatives for Gates/Cherokee, the Denver Design Center, and the Alameda Station. Accordingly, we are very familiar with the physical barriers deploying our students to such remote locations would present. Quite simply, there is no meaningful pedestrian or bicycle access from our neighborhood to the schools identified west of I-25, nor is building such access part of any of the City's plans for these new developments. Thus, designating these as schools to serve the local populations of West and East Washington Park and the Baker Neighborhood would mean that children could not walk or bicycle to or from school.

WWPNA also is intimately familiar with the needs and desires of residents within its borders. During 2008, we conducted material outreach in our neighborhood, knocking at least once on the door of every home south of Alameda between Downing and Lincoln Streets. Through this outreach, we observed first-hand the growing number of families in our neighborhood, and received substantial feedback from them. The families who have moved to West Washington Park value and support their community, including their local schools. These people are *not* part of a transient population, destined to move to the suburbs when their children reach school-age. Rather, they are invested in their homes and public schools and want to stay here for the long haul. Maintaining high quality public schools in our neighborhood is important to them, and is part of the mission of DPS.

3. **Review of DPS Process.**

The retention of the ULI, a non-profit group comprised primarily of professionals involved in the development industry, was an unprecedented action by DPS. The ULI group was composed of realtors, developers and City officials charged with economic development. Interestingly, this is the first time the ULI has provided recommendations on school facilities. By its own admission, ULI assesses buildings independent of their previous uses. It was apparent in both the interview process and from the report to the Board of Education that ULI's expertise is in projecting the best use of properties from an economic development standpoint, but that ULI is a novice at matters relating to public education and use of public assets.

We believe the identification of Byers School for sale was predicated on the perceived amount of money that could be garnered from its location in a desirable neighborhood, not on what is in the best interest of the current and future children of our communities. While this result is understandable for ULI, given its composition and interests, it does not comport with DPS' mission and duty.

4. Viable Alternatives to Sale.

There exist viable alternatives to the sale of Byers School that would allow DPS to retain this important amenity to meet the future needs of the communities of southern Denver. For example, the Pearl Street Arts Center has approach DPS about leasing Byers to create a resource center for artists of all trades and crafts. This group also has suggested that some portion of the school grounds could be used as a community playground or dog park.

WWPNA supports proposals that would maintain Byers as a place of learning while preserving the building for future shared-use by DPS.

As the increased enrollments at Lincoln and Steele Schools reflect, the families of southern Denver and the communities here are doing our part to support our public schools. We now urge DPS to partner with us, and to honor its commitment to the families of southern Denver by retaining Byers School in its asset portfolio for future use as a middle school.

Respectfully submitted,

Charlie Busch, President
West Washington Park Neighborhood Association

Copies to:

Jeannie Kaplan, District 3
David Suppes, DPS COO
Will Lee-Ashley, DPS Lead Analyst
Marc Waxman, DPS New Schools
Bruce Hoyt, District 1
Michelle Moss, District 2 and VP
Kevin Patterson, District 4
Arturo Jimenez, District 5
Theresa Pena, Board President
Jill Conrad, At Large Board Member

Councilman Chris Nevitt

Baker Historic Neighborhood Association
Washington Park East Neighborhood Association