

Borough of Tenafly

MAYOR AND COUNCIL

SPECIAL COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE MEETING

MINUTES

TUESDAY, MAY 31, 2011

The meeting was called to order at 7:07 P.M. with the reading of the Open Public Meetings Act statement by Council President LaMastra.

Present: Mayor Peter S. Rustin (arrived at 7:18 p.m.)

Council members: Anthony Barzelatto, Barry Honig, Martha Kerge,
Nadia LaMastra, Michael Lattif, Jon Warms

Borough Administrator: Jewel Thompson-Chin

Borough Attorney: William R. McClure, Esq.

Absent: None.

Presentation by Mark W. Gordon of Urbana Consulting, LLC and John M. McCormack, PE, PTOE of Sam Schwartz Engineering.

Mr. Gordon explained how his firm was hired to provide recommendations to improve the safety of the students of Smith School, while maintaining traffic control. The existing conditions of the area were evaluated during the month of April. He stated that the recommendations identified policy initiatives to be undertaken by the Borough or Board of Education at virtually no cost, as well as capital improvements, which move more of the pickup and drop off activity closer to the school property and utilize the whole perimeter of the school.

Mr. McCormack stated that the school is surrounded by several roadways that are utilized to some degree. He reviewed the current street closures configuration for pedestrian access to the school and photos taken around the school that highlight the pedestrian traffic, parking, and pickup/drop off activity. He identified access and circulation issues that include an extensive backup of vehicles, parents and children walking down the middle of streets or front lawns, insufficient parking for parents and staff, lack of school crossing signage and markings, and the inconvenience of one-way streets.

He reviewed the policy recommendations that included continuing to close the portion of Downey Drive between the school driveway and Oak Street during the morning-arrival and afternoon-dismissal periods, improving the sight lines at several intersections surrounding the school, increasing the adult supervision and management of the drop-off/pick-up areas in order to ensure that parents are using the areas properly, efficiently and safely, staggering the arrival/dismissal times at the school, keeping the roads clear of leaf piles and snow, routine monitoring of vehicle speeds along Leroy Street with radar boxes to raise awareness, and encouraging a "No Idling" policy as parents wait for their children either on the school property or on the residential streets surrounding the school. The capital improvements suggested involve installing crosswalks and

school crossing signs, the installation of sidewalks (along the Leroy Street bumpout, both sides of Downey Drive, and the east side of Thatcher Road), improving pedestrian access from Leroy Street, providing a pedestrian plaza, widening the main drive aisle, providing an additional drop-off/pick-up area, expanding the staff parking area by relocating the playground, and providing an additional crossing guard for the intersection of Thatcher Road and South Park Drive.

Mr. Gordon summarized that all of the recommendations contribute to increasing the safety of the students.

C. Honig congratulated Mr. Gordon and Mr. McCormack for a well-balanced study that contemplates the needs of all the parties involved. He stated that this study is a considerable improvement from the prior plan of installing a sidewalk to Engle Street. He asked Mr. McCormack which sets of capital items will yield the most improvements.

Mr. McCormack responded that a priority project is the installation of crosswalks, markings, and signs before the next school year. He then listed in priority order sidewalks on Leroy Street, the sidewalks on Downey Drive and the pedestrian plaza as having the greatest impact on safety.

C. Lattif asked Mr. McCormack to describe the visual impact of the items he identified as priority projects.

Mr. McCormack explained that the markings and signage will be a traffic calming measure for drivers and if sidewalks are provided, pedestrians will use them. Radar boxes bring alertness to speeding. Crosswalks, markings, and signs raise awareness of school activity in the area.

C. Barzelatto inquired if speed bumps on Leroy and Downey were taken into consideration, as well as access for emergency vehicles. He also asked that which recommendations be have the greatest impact.

Mr. McCormack responded that the roads have to be evaluated to determine if they meet the criteria for the installation of speed bumps/humps and that the construction of the pedestrian plaza will be widen the current configuration to accommodate emergency vehicle access. Mr. Gordon emphasized that all of the policy recommendations should be implemented and that if half of the capital improvements, including the parking area, were to be implemented a sidewalk on the north side of Downey Drive may not be needed.

C. LaMastra inquired how to make access to the school from Leroy Street more inviting for parents to use.

Mr. McCormack explained how a sidewalk, steps, and adult supervision would increase access to the school from Leroy Street.

C. Honig asked how the recommendations would affect area residents in accessing their homes.

Mr. Gordon commented that eliminating the one-way restriction, congestion will be reduced. Mr. McCormack described that if the school can be accessed by other areas, Downey Drive will be used less.

Mayor Rustin opened the comment section to the Board of Education Members.

Phyllis Perskie-Kesslen - Board of Education President – commented how the order of priorities changed from the Joint Use meeting in which Mr. Gordon verbally ranked the sidewalks on Downey Drive first, followed by the crosswalks and markings, and then the pedestrian plaza. She mentioned that the buildings manager advised that only 10 spots can potentially be added to the area.

Sam Bruno – Board of Education Member - asked Mr. McCormack to elaborate on what mentioned at the Joint Use meeting that he saw frightening during the course of the study and how to remedy the situation. Mr. McCormack answered that what was frightening to him were children and parents were walking out on the street and that the remedy would be sidewalks.

Mayor Rustin opened the hearing for public comment.

Steve Savas – 40 South Park Drive – stated that the report was an excellent starting point, but did not cite if there were any accidents and did not amplify procedures to take advantage of engineering recommendations. He stated that there was a conflict within the report and compared the current procedure at Smith School with a school he observed in Franklin Lakes.

Conrad Bloom – 89 Downey Drive – congratulated the consultants for taking a broad view instead of looking at the matter solely as a sidewalk issue. He described the area as having too much activity with a parking lane, traffic lane, and drop off lane. Due to this winter's snow accumulations, the parking lane was eliminated from the north side, but traffic improved. He suggested eliminating parking, enacting a staggered dismissal, and using Leroy Street to the maximum.

Mark Rosenberg – 41 Downey Drive – mentioned that the report neglected to cite that between 8am to 9am and 3pm to 4pm the traffic on the jug handle is routed to school property. 75% of the recommendations fall upon the school board before shifting the onus onto Downey Drive residents.

Scott Lanin – 83 Downey Drive – explained how he knows about the situation personally and how the burden belongs to the Board of Education. Many procedural recommendations would immediately relieve the issue. The drop-off system of having a carpool and parking is a problem. Parking should be eliminated so that the traffic would flow better. Since the playground is behind his property, he hopes the trees are undisturbed. He emphasized that the Council should shift responsibility to where it belongs – to the Board of Education, because based on the study, the school board is responsible for the children's' safety.

C. Lattif responded that Council's decision is independent of the decisions of the Board of Education and that one governing body cannot pressure the other.

Phyllis Perskie-Kesslen – explained that for years, the Board of Education has tried to find a solution to this problem. In 1954, the PTA asked Council to install sidewalks. Installation of a sidewalk on the south side of Downey Drive is the immediate solution. The study brought interesting points that the Board will try to institute, but the matter is a cooperative effort. Schools and roads were not built for today's usage.

John Onsidler – 93 Downey Drive – appreciated the study and encouraged the implementation of the policy changes before the capital projects.

Mayor Rustin inquired about the staggered release schedule with regards to parents that also have children in the middle school and/or the high school.

Mr. Gordon responded that not all parents fit in that category and that the shift would be about 5 to 7 minutes of a time difference.

Lynn Trager – Board of Education Superintendent – described how there are parents who have children in the middle school and high school, there is no busing, and there is already a differential for kindergarten students who arrive 5 minutes earlier.

Mr. Gordon responded that this is a matter that the Board of Education needs to figure out.

Jeff Thompson – 41 Lawrence Parkway – commented that Smith School is the only school that is not surrounded by sidewalks and whether the costs are undertaken by the Board of Education or the Council, the same taxpayer is affected, so this should not be a territorial issue. He asked since the Borough has been put on notice with this study about the conditions in the area, if there were any exposure of liability to the municipality.

Mr. McClure explained how the Borough is protected under Title 59. Mayor Rustin advised everyone to keep in mind that no one wins in litigation due to the costs that are bared.

Ray Murphy – 48 Downey Drive – remarked that the main issue should be what is convenient for the parents of the students, urged to have the non-cost issues implemented, and emphasized that there should not be any parking on Downey Drive in order for fire trucks to access the area.

Lynne Stewart – Board of Education Member – stated that both governing bodies ultimately have to worry about children's safety and the burden to the taxpayers. She asked the consultant what is really needed, where do sidewalks fall as a priority project, and how can the Borough get the most bang for its buck.

Mr. Gordon replied that the policy recommendations must be considered as soon as possible, before the next school year and the capital projects were listed in priority order in the report, but the financial resources will determine the priority and implementation of these items.

Lisa Giordano – 48 Downey Drive – stated that the scope of the work was flawed as the installation of a sidewalk was included as a priority, neighboring residents were alienated, and the study should start over. Smith School starts later than the middle school and high school. The circle should be converted to a platform for the principal, teachers, and volunteers to meet up with the kids. It is dangerous to construct a sidewalk to accommodate a carpool lane.

Mr. McCormack responded that the carpool lane is hardly moving, there are unsupervised children walking in the area, there is limited frontage with a huge demand, and a sidewalk on the south side of Downey Drive would accommodate to the demand.

Neil Kaplicer – Principal of Smith School – explained the staggered dismissal for kindergarten and first grade students, then students in second through fifth grade. Kindergarten and first grade students are handed to an adult, the school needs to provide a place for those picking up the youngest students for safety reasons, which accounts for 1/3 of the student population. Policy changes have been made to mitigate this situation.

Mary Onkwa – Downey Drive – asked why the pedestrian plaza is not being emphasized more. Policies need to be amended to keep the children on the premises.

Kim Harrison – Lawrence Parkway – described how there would be more walkers if it were safe to do so.

Sara Levinson & Emily Change – Smith School HAS parents – implored urged Council and the Board of Education to make a decision and move forward since this matter has created divisions among neighbors in the area.

Jeff Grossman – 71 Downey Drive – discussed impervious cover, trees that may need to be taken down for the construction of sidewalks, and reconfiguring the parking lot and drop-off area for passenger side drop off.

Steve Savas – 40 South Park Drive – compared the two different philosophies in the report which encourage parents to drive to school, park, and walk versus accelerating and improving the pickup and drop off of students. He suggested surveying the parents, since only one philosophy must be chosen and the report only addresses engineering issues.

Ray Murphy – 48 Downey Drive – suggested that the policy should require children to enter and exit a vehicle only on school property.

Scott Lanin – 83 Downey Drive – asked if Council will condone a policy for children to be dropped off in a carpool lane off of school property without supervision. He recommended that the school open earlier for an earlier drop off as many other municipalities already do.

John Onsidler – Downey Drive – explained that elementary school children cannot sit on the passenger seat by law and that children should exit through the backseat behind the driver's side. He encouraged the implementation of policy changes.

Lynn Trager – Board of Education Superintendent – asked if the Board of Education and Council were to implement the policy changes, would the installation of sidewalks still be recommended.

Mr. McCormack responded that sidewalks would still be recommended because parents and children are still walking in the street.

Mayor Rustin closed the public comment portion of the hearing for Council's concluding remarks.

Mayor Rustin summarized that the consultant's suggestions belong to either one group or another, funding for a sidewalk has been set aside by the Borough, but he was not sure if the Board of Education has set funds aside as their costs are significantly higher. It makes no sense to delay the safety of children and it is a tragedy that neighbors are split over this issue. Closure needs to be brought to this issue.

C. Barzelatto explained how this study set a precedent in that once a study is conducted at one school, issues will pop up where the other schools will request studies. The Council has a responsibility to fulfill the recommendations of the report as it is embarrassing to be going back and forth with this issue. He does not want it on his conscious should anyone get hurt at Smith School.

C. Honig commented that the Council and Board of Education serve the constituents and that both bodies need to work together towards solutions. The study is very balanced and he hopes the Board of Education takes the recommendations very seriously and implements them. He wants to execute the municipal issues of this study. It is a tragedy this issue has caused division in the community.

C. LaMastra thanked the consultants for their presentation and for answering the questions posed to them this evening. As a parent, she has walked in the middle of the street because there was no where else to go. She expressed that since Leroy Street has a downhill slope, she is uncomfortable having younger children use this entrance. The sidewalk will not just be for children. There is no lighting in the area at night, which poses a safety hazard.

C. Warms explained that the proposed structural changes also require a change in human behavior. Sidewalks are the place for children to walk and the school needs a network of sidewalks. He mentioned that many people go to Smith School since it serves as a polling place for elections.

C. Lattif described the time challenges that face both bodies and inquired on the status of the outstanding bid.

Mrs. Thompson-Chin remarked that policy changes can be fast tracked to be in place by September, but physical improvements are subject to the bidding process. The issue of the outstanding bid will be discussed at the June 14th work session.

C. Kerge expressed that she was proud that this Council authorized the study. She congratulated the consultants and stated that she would like to start implementing the policy changes immediately and move on with this issue.

ADJOURNMENT

As there was no further business to come before the Council, on a motion by C. Kerge, second by C. LaMastra, and unanimously carried, to adjourn this meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 10:56 p.m.

Lissette Aportela-Hernandez, MPA, RMC
Borough Clerk