

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
REPORT TO COUNCIL

SUBJECT: Putting a different school in the old Greenbelt Middle School building

BACKGROUND: The Advisory Committee on Education (ACE) shares a member (Janet Mirsky) with the Greenbelt Middle School Task Force, and has monitored the actions and recommendations of the Task Force. ACE considers its purview to be formal education, and so for much of the discussion, has chosen not to formally comment on options that the Task Force considered for the use of the building. Most of these options have not involved schools, and are expected to have little impact on the Greenbelt Middle School once it moves to its new building.

In a Greenbelt News Review article dated March 22, 2012, the possibility was raised of Turning Point Academy public charter school moving into the old GMS building. As this possibility involves a school, and could have a large and negative impact on Greenbelt Middle School and Springhill Lake Elementary School, ACE decided to comment.

FINDINGS:

ACE discussed the issue at their meeting on March 27, 2012. ACE chose to communicate directly to the Task Force rather than to Council. ACE chose to pose their concerns in the form of three questions to the Task Force.

The GMS Task Force discussed ACE's questions and decided to pass them on to Council without comment. The questions were discussed by Council on April 23, 2012, with ACE Chair Jon Gardner in attendance. At the meeting, Council questioned ACE's choice of communicating with the GMS Task Force rather than directly to Council and requested an ACE Report to Council with the three questions.

ACE discussed the topic again at their meeting on April 24, 2012, and decided to issue this Report. In addition to the original three questions, ACE decided to add a fourth question.

ACE's concerns are:

- 1) The sports and playing fields associated with the new building are expected to be fully used by the Greenbelt Middle School. The old building no longer has any associated fields. It would be a large and negative impact on Greenbelt Middle School to have to

share their fields. At the same time, ACE considers playing fields to be a necessary facility for a school, and therefore the old building is no longer adequate for a school.

- 2) School bus and other traffic to Greenbelt Middle School is going to increase noticeably with the addition of the TAG student population plus the 6th graders from two additional feeder schools. Putting another school in the immediate area, particularly a charter school to which a large fraction of students need to be bused or driven, would create an impossible traffic situation at the start and end of school each day.
- 3) ACE finds that Springhill Lake Elementary School and Greenbelt Middle School are doing extremely well at serving needs of the population of Greenbelt West, despite the challenges of high turnover rates and significant numbers of students for whom English is a second language. ACE is concerned that a third competing school in the immediate area would dilute the active involvement of the parents and could have a negative impact on other resources that the local community provide to these two schools.
- 4) ACE has heard speculation that putting a school into the old GMS building would exempt the building from the requirement that it be brought up to current code. ACE recognizes that the new building is being built for the Greenbelt Middle School because the old building is in inadequate condition for a school. For example, ACE recognizes that the old building is not compliant with the American with Disabilities Act, having no elevators and many parts of the building reachable only by stairs. ACE is concerned that putting a school into a building that is in such poor condition, for the purposes of saving money for necessary renovations, would be extremely short-sighted and a disservice to the school.

ACE discussed this report in its final form at their meeting on 5/22/2012, and voted to approve it.

RECOMMENDATION: ACE recommends that Council oppose any school occupying the old Greenbelt Middle School building unless there are satisfactory answers to these four questions.

- 1) How will the unavailability of any daytime playing fields affect the occupants of the old Middle School building?
- 2) Is there a plan to mitigate the expected large increase in traffic problems?
- 3) What educational impact would a competing K-8 school have on the existing schools in Greenbelt West?
- 4) Will the old building be renovated and brought into compliance with all codes and laws before it is occupied?

Approved by ACE on 5/22/12 with a vote of 7-0.