

Collins View neighbors argue that recent school closures violate City-Schools Policy

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

At a recent hearing before the Portland Planning Commission on the Portland Plan, the proposed updating of the Portland Comprehensive Plan and city regulations and policies in general, virtually all the testimony centered on a single topic: the City-Schools Policy.

This little-known document was drafted in 1979 by former Portland planning director Lloyd Keefe. It was generally an attempt to create more cooperation between city government and the Portland School District, independent jurisdictions who have not always had the most cooperative

relationships.

One provision of the policy spelled out procedures for public involvement that the district would have to go through before closing one of its public schools. Those who spoke, including longtime Collins View neighborhood activists Dave and Dixie Johnston, charged that the district has consistently violated these regulations during recent school closures, including the closure of Smith School.

"These aren't things that you hope the district would do," Dixie Johnston later told *The Post*. "These are regulations that they have to follow." Nonetheless, she said, they and others have received brush-offs when they bring the matter up with district officials.

At a subsequent Planning Commission meeting, planner Steve Dotterer questioned whether the provisions were legally enforceable. "There's no record that the District ever adopted this," he said. "There's not a terribly strong tie to the Comprehensive Plan. It's a fairly unclear and old set of policies."

Doug Capps, who says he helped create the policy as a member of former Mayor Neil Goldschmidt's staff and now works for the School District, had a similar assessment later for *The Post*. "It's probably not in the planning and zoning codes," he said. "In any event it's 30 years old, and no one remembers it except some community activists who want to use it to their advantage."

Ironically, the occasion for the commission discussion was a joint effort by the district and Planning Bureau to make existing land use regulations for schools more lenient. Most of Portland's schools sit on land zoned for residential use, with the schools operating as conditional uses.

Any significant change in use requires a public process to amend the permit. Planner Eric Engstrom said that neighbors have complained that the activities of groups who have leased built or vacant school property, or are using it by permission, constitute code violations.

"There should be more flexibility than the zoning code currently allows," Capps said. "You wouldn't want to let an early childhood center be turned into an alternative high school without a public review."

Capps added that the district is not planning to close more schools or make other drastic changes. "The Portland Plan assumes 300,000 more people will move here, and presumably some of them will have kids," he said. "Is it sensible to be downsizing?"

Some members of the Planning Commission were uneasy with the discussion. Andre Baugh said, "I feel uncomfortable having heard the testimony last time, and anticipating hearing those complaints again."

Commission member Catherine Ciarlo agreed, imagining some of the earlier testifiers saying, "They not only ignored the violations we told them about, but they changed the code."

Yet another commission member, Howard Shapiro, said the public will view any proposed code changes in this area "with suspicion based on past history." Capps assured the commission there would be public notification of any proposed changes. "We won't try to slip something past," he said.



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