



PORTOBELLO COMMUNITY COUNCIL

**18 Brunstane Road North
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3rd April 2006

Chief Executive
City of Edinburgh Council
City Chambers
High Street
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Dear Sir,

At the end of January at a School Board meeting at Portobello High School, outline proposals were presented to replace Portobello High School and St John's School Portobello with new schools on the site of Portobello Golf Course. I know there is broad agreement in the community that there is a need for major investment in the future of schooling in Portobello.

Several members of Portobello Community Council have expressed disappointment that City Council officials decided to present the proposals in a way that suggested that there was no realistic alternative and that the decision was the only solution to a critical problem at the schools. I am pleased that Councillor Maureen Child was able to tell the Community Council that this is not the case, but only the start of a thorough process of consultation. At the February meeting of Portobello Community Council there was a very open debate about the proposals and the minutes of that meeting demonstrate strong feelings on the issue. There was more debate at this week's meeting, where there was broad support for a thorough review of options. At this stage I would like to present some initial comments on the proposal.

Portobello High School and St John's School

The proposal makes out that the current High School is in a very poor state and long past its sell-by date, and that new build is the only solution. It was only last year that the school was not chosen for selection in the latest PPP round, suggesting that it is not one of the schools in poorest condition in Edinburgh, although it was top of the list if the funding for the scheme could be increased. However, I understand that the PPP proposal in Portobello was not for a new school, but renovation of the current buildings and site. Members of the Community Council, some of who were educated at the High School, suggest that far from being a terrible building, the school is one with fond memories and a landmark building in Portobello. What has happened in the last 12 months to so change perceptions of the school? We would like to see the initial proposals for the PPP re-examined and a cost-benefit analysis

of renovation of the current school compared with a new build. Perhaps you could arrange a tour of the school for the Community Council?

I understand that the proposal to rebuild St John's school was a surprise to the St John's School Board. There was no push for a new school from the Board, but I understand that the Board welcomes the Council's intention to bring forward plans for redevelopment. From my own experience as a parent of pupils at the school, I know that the classrooms are small, and the school is generally short of facilities for the number of children. I have been informed that there was review of St John's towards the end of 2004 to look at how the current facilities could be improved to meet modern educational requirements. Are the results of this review available, and have they been acted upon? It has been suggested that although the St John's building is not listed, the frontage is a classical school design and there may be some merit in preservation of this for its architectural heritage.

It is clear that both existing schools do not meet current thinking on optimum school design. The documents released by the Council indicate a set of criteria that are associated with an "ideal school". These include sports facilities on site, a low-rise building, centre of catchment area etc. The bases for these criteria are not always clear and could be contested. It seems apparent that the Council proposals hinge round these issues and the Education Department has put these criteria before any other community or planning criteria in the area. Few, if any schools in Edinburgh would meet all the criteria – indeed some of the very successful schools in the city have medium rise buildings and playing fields far from the site of the school. We contest that the decision on whether to build a new school, and where to build, and what type of school to be built should consider wider aspects of planning and development within the area, rather than be based on the narrow view of just an education perspective. Sir Terry Farrell made similar points at the Waterfront meeting earlier this month about considering the bigger picture during development.

What schooling does Portobello require in the future?

The initial proposals appear to be based on replacing like-for-like, i.e. rebuilding a new high school and a new primary school. Have the long-term trends in school roll numbers been assessed? It was only at the end of last year that we were told that there were several too many primary schools in Edinburgh. We are very proud of the achievements at St John's and are certainly not recommending closing a very successful school. Portobello High School was at one time the biggest school in Europe. Is this an opportunity to replace the school with two smaller schools on separate sites? Have the Council looked at changing catchment areas so that new proposals could be considered? The proposals presented so far provide little or no information on such alternative and innovative ideas. We welcome the report in the Evening News (March 23rd) that the Council are belatedly beginning to look at alternatives.

Financing of Redevelopment

City of Edinburgh Councillors and officials have suggested that the only way to get a new school is to raise capital by further selling of city assets. They have focussed on Portobello and indicated that the only possible way of funding new schools is to knock down the existing schools, sell the land for housing, build the new schools on part of the golf course, and sell off at least part, if not all, the rest of the area for yet more housing. This is hardly an example of best practise or sustainable policies. What happens in 40 years when we need the next new school? There will be no green spaces left to sell!

We urge the Council to look for innovative ideas to fund any new and necessary development by other means. These are several suggestions by Community Councillors and local residents. I am sure that the City Council should be able to develop further ideas:

- a) Use funding from the sale of the 5-a-side site in Portobello towards funding renovation or new build.
- b) Use funding from the sale of the land where other schools are being closed because of falling numbers.
- c) Use funding from the sale of other assets across Edinburgh to support the new build. There seems to be one-way traffic in East Edinburgh - to take resources and facilities away from the east to elsewhere in Edinburgh.
- d) Build housing on the Jewel.
- e) There are several schools across Edinburgh that are gaining funding through PPP initiatives. These areas do not have to give up facilities for new schools, but Portobello does. Why shouldn't the sale of assets be Edinburgh-wide rather than just in Portobello?
- f) Change the designation of some green belt land to allow building on the edge of the city. This would allow valuable open spaces and leisure facilities to be retained within the city.
- g) Look for external funding from the lottery, government, through commercial sponsorship or elsewhere. Portobello could make use of the waterfront initiative to develop a marine or renewable energy specialism to the school along the lines of some of the specialist schools for music, languages etc. This may open up new sources of capital.
- h) Transfer the bus depot at Seafield to the freightliner terminal and redevelop the water front site to raise funds.
- i) Enhance the current site by utilising the long-neglected tennis courts at the school. If St John's was moved to share the Duddingston Primary campus, there would be significant extra room on the current site. If the High School was moved, then St John's could be extended onto the tennis courts.

The Council has indicated that a major overhaul of the High School would be very difficult with pupils remaining on site. It is suggested that during renovation, pupils from the High School could temporarily relocate to the old Holyrood site once the new Holyrood School is completed.

Other sites

The initial proposal is based on the golf course being the only site big enough and viable for a new school. We dispute this, as although desirable to have full on-site sports facilities, it is not an overarching requirement. Other suggested sites include

- a) Holyrood campus
- b) Freightliner terminal
- c) Duddingston School (for a new St John's)
- d) "Pitz" site (possibly combined with the Scottish Power site)
- e) Lothian Bus Depot on the Promenade (including an option to build out into the sea – which could fit in with the Waterfront redevelopment)

Portobello Community Council held a public meeting in October 2006 in the Town Hall. The rebuild of the High School was not the specific issue of the evening, which focussed on the

“Pitz” site and alternative locations. A questionnaire completed at that meeting was used to try and gain a feeling for where the Community Council should focus their activities and efforts. There was overwhelming support for the preservation of open spaces and community facilities in Portobello that go together to make the area attractive to residents and visitors.

The people of Portobello are united in wanting an excellent education for their children, but I urge the Council to look carefully at all the alternative solutions and come up with a development plan which considers the whole community in line with sustainable strategic planning and innovative thinking. Portobello Community Council would be delighted to help the City Council undertake consultation on a range of alternatives, and we look forward to seeing a timetable for detailed consultation, and an open debate that looks at all the issues before a decision is made.

Yours sincerely,

Robert W Gatliff
Chairman
Portobello Community Council

cc: Gavin Strang MP
Susan Deacon MSP
Roy Jobson, Director of Children and Families