

Position Paper: The Case Opposing Curbside Drop-Off At The Bertschi School

January 30, 2006

Introduction

The Bertschi School is a private Pre-K thru 5 elementary school located in the heart of North Capitol Hill's residential district. Since its inception in 1981 it has operated on a "conditional use" permit from the City. It is currently operating in a series of converted residential structures and an old church, all located within a small L2 zone (Lowrise multifamily) along 10th Avenue East in an urban area where all other zoning is "single family."

At the beginning of the 2005-06 school year the Bertschi School implemented a dramatically new drop-off system that uses the parking lane/curbside of 10th Avenue East. Since 1976 the school, and its predecessor, a daycare center, has used its own off-street drive-through to accommodate its drop-off traffic. But the drive-through is an acknowledged "chokepoint." As it is currently configured and sized it is ill prepared to handle the ever-increasing number of vehicles that are associated with the school. The school has no busing or vanpool capability and carpooling has not been actively promoted. As a result nearly every student arrives (and departs) in a privately owned vehicle. Only a few students and their parents actually walk to the school from their residences as 90% of the enrollment lives outside of the North Capitol Hill area. And even those that do live in the area often drive their children to school, especially during inclement weather. The students are understandably too young to walk to school without adult supervision. The resultant impact is that the school creates traffic gridlock conditions on 10th Avenue East, a heavily used arterial that is itself of substandard design and size, and congestion throughout the neighborhood's narrow and cramped side streets.

Curbside drop-off is not a new concept to schools in the Seattle area nor is it a new idea for the Bertschi School, but this is first time it has been employed by Bertschi. The record shows that the Seattle Traffic Safety Advisory Committee met with school officials and the school's transportation consultant, Heffron Transportation, Inc., in October 2004. At this time the new school year has just beginning and the school was still using its off-street drive-through for off-loading. Concurrent with the start of the 2004/05 school year Bertschi extended its drop-off time by 15 minutes (from 8:15 am to 8:30 am to 8:00 am to 8:30 am) with the objective of spreading out the distribution of its heavily clustered drop-off traffic. A DVD is available to depict the impact of this concentration of vehicles. The neighborhood community council who was meeting regularly with the school to work on some of the adverse impacts created by the school prompted this initiative.

In short, the extended drop-off time did not and has not produced the desired effect. A series of traffic studies conducted throughout the 2004/05 school year and again this year has proven conclusively that over 85% of the drop-off traffic still cluster around the 8:15 am to 8:30 am timeframe.

The Seattle Traffic Safety Advisory Committee made a number of other noteworthy recommendations in 2004:

- Add on-pavement striping to the drop-off area to discourage drivers from blocking the sidewalk on 10th Avenue East during the morning drop-off. *Status: The school never implemented this recommendation and drivers continue this highly unsafe practice of blocking the sidewalk used by children and parents that walk to the school.*
- Look into removing or moving the existing bus stop that is adjacent to the school. *Status: The level of the school's effort is unclear but the fact remains that the bus stop has not moved and now more than ever the Bertschi drop-off queue is in direct competition with the three METRO buses that stop during the drop-off timeframe. The buses routinely have to load and unload from the middle of the arterial and riders are forced to negotiate a moving queue of vehicles that are completely blocking the bus stop. This has to be considered another highly unsafe practice.*

- Enlist 5th graders as safety patrol to assist students out of the vehicles. *Status: There is no evidence to suggest that this recommendation was considered as none of the students are involved with any component of the drop-off or pick-up process.*
- Continue parent education to get parents to distribute evenly throughout the morning drop-off period, rather than having a surge just before school starts. *Status: The effectiveness of continuing education is best measured in the end result. In over a year and a half the school has been unable to materially alter the “surge.” As noted above over 85% of the drop-off traffic still clusters around the 8:15 am to 8:30 am timeframe.*
- Consider extending the length of the drop-off area. *Status: This suggested fix has been in the schools plans for years. The record shows that the school purchased the Reid Court Apartments, located on the NW corner of the East Boston Street and 10th Avenue East, in 2001 and immediately commissioned Carlson Architects to develop an expansion plan. The drop-off and drive-through area was to be widened and significantly lengthened. While the Carlson plans were set aside (reportedly for fiscal reasons) the new plans developed by Miller Hull architects that were submitted with the MUP application in May 2004 contained the identical changes to the drop-off and drive through area. The school touted this as their big transportation fix and presented this to the neighborhood on a number of occasions. But four months into the project review process the school is unable to resolve a serious “no vote” from the landlord of the property at 2219 10th Avenue East, property that the school leases and property that would be the principal target for the drive-through expansion. The school was thus forced to remove this element from the project. The school tried to make the case that the extension of the drop-off time would be a viable alternative and viable fix for its long-standing transportation problems. As mentioned earlier this extension has not produced the desired results. In August 2005 the neighborhood association filed a large set of code compliance complaints against the school. One of those complaints is directed at the drive-through because it does not meet the approved design that was issued by the City. The corrective action requested would have the drive-through built to the original specifications and also elongated to include the space now used for the refuse and recycling containers. This level of expansion would provide a sizeable off-street loading and unloading capacity and presumably eliminate the need for the school to “privatize” the parking spaces along 10th Avenue East.*
- Consider changing the morning drop-off area from the small on-site drop-off area to the street curb on 10th Avenue East. The drop off area should be shifted to the south so more vehicles could be unloaded at one time, and so more space would be available for queued vehicles. *Status: As already mentioned the school implemented this recommendation concurrent with the beginning of the new school year. However, the drop-off area has not been “shifted to the south” but is simply in front of the original entrance and exit to its drive-through. There is not “more space for queued vehicles” unless one counts the bus stop area that extends to the intersection, the intersection itself and the “No Parking South Of Here” space along 10th Avenue East just north of East Lynn Street. These are the areas that fill-up every morning with a vehicle queue that exceeds 12 vehicles. The shift to curbside drop-off has maybe improved the flow but it is difficult to detect because the school has added still more students, parents who used to park and walk their children to school to avoid the long queues and congestion have reentered the drop-off system and the traffic on 10th Avenue East has undoubtedly increased somewhat. Curbside drop-off is simply not the answer some thought it might be. Curbside drop-off has incentivized the use of the vehicle drop-off option by a staggering number. Last school year the number averaged around 85 vehicles and now the number is around 115 – a 35% increase!*

As a point of information this Position Paper makes reference to a large number of reference materials. Copies or further information about the source of any of the material is available upon request.

Background

A brief historical review is needed to fully appreciate the dynamics of this situation. The existing drive-through was designed and built long before the school itself was established in mid-1981. The permit record available at DPD’s

Microfilm Library reveals that this drive-through was constructed to support a daycare center that was being developed in 1972. During the period 1972 to 1976 “enrollment” reportedly averaged around 30 children. The 2-story building housing the daycare center is located at the 2227 10th Avenue East. This building is the central core of what is now known as The Bertschi School. The current owners of the Bertschi School, Mr. and Mrs. (Bertschi) Peter Erickson, purchased the daycare center in 1976. That same year they obtained a permit (#565239) to add “accessory parking” in the rear of the drive-through for 5 vehicles. Over the next few years they added to the enrollment and by 1980 enrollment was at 55. In early 1980 they purchased a unused church, located just north of their daycare center and on the corner of 10th Avenue East and East Lynn Street. They battled considerable opposition from the neighborhood that was trying to keep its residential character in tact. Numerous appeals to the Hearing Examiner, the Board of Adjustment and even the City Council (when the Council was involved in such matters) resulted in a stalemate. Finally, by mid-1981, after another DCLU (now DPD) decision and another appeal to the Hearing Examiner (by both the school and the neighbors) the school was granted a permit to convert the daycare center to a “nongraded school” and to provide for a small expansion of this operation into the newly acquired church building.

The permit was conditional of a number of important factors that continue to influence traffic and parking to this day. Prior to issuing this permit the City’s Engineering Department (now known as the Department of Transportation) reviewed the proposal and made a number of very noteworthy traffic and parking recommendations that still play true. They are prefaced with the observation that “the Bertschi School is **the** major traffic generator on that block and should not promote traffic interruptions along 10th Avenue East.” This assessment is considered fundamental to understanding the neighborhood’s current resistance to the school’s latest expansion plans. The Bertschi School is still **the** major traffic generator, but not just of the block, but now its for the entire area. And the adverse impacts have magnified many times over. The Engineering Department’s 1981 report also says “accident records show that the mid-block section of 10th Avenue East from E. Boston to E. Lynn streets has a fairly high accident rate.” The specific recommendations to mitigate the impact of the proposed project included the following excerpt:

“Vehicle access to the property is via 10th Avenue East; a drive-through on site loading zone. That existing drive-through area is of substandard design and maneuvering through is difficult. The presence of one car impedes all other vehicle movement in the drive-through. The traffic analysis shows up to 20 vehicles arriving within a 15-minute time period. Additional student enrollment with the proposed facility will increase the number of vehicle arrivals. The existing drive-through is inadequate for accommodating the projected increase in volume of traffic. To accommodate more off-street loading vehicles, the Bertschi School drive-through and parking area should be redesigned as part of the new development, to allow easier vehicle maneuvers and increased vehicle storage area. We suggest the following design criteria for the Bertschi School drive-through.

- One-way operation of the drive through (i.e., "Do Not Enter" signing)
- Increased turning radius at the entrance and exit
- Longer drive-through distance for storage
- Widened driveway to 20 ft to provide passage for two vehicles (minimum 24') [Approved plans are on file, dated February 19, 1981]
- Setback of playground fence to provide standard parking spaces for five or more vehicles (8.5 ft. x 19 ft.)”

[Memorandum, City of Seattle Engineering Department, January 26, 1981]

All of these findings and recommendations of the Engineering Department were included in the Final Decision of Non-Significance (DNS) dated April 28, 1981. The owners of the daycare center and the church building did not appeal any of these conditions but rather were reportedly more than willing to comply in order to get on with their project. It is interesting to note that the Engineering Department made its assessments and recommendations based on an enrollment of 60 students and was expressing real concern about the impacts on the neighborhood when enrollment increases to 88. Today, with an even more compromised transportation network in this area we find the same “inadequate” drive-through. The Bertschi School has somehow been allowed to expand its enrollment to over 220 full-time students and the number of vehicles that arrive within the same 15-minute time period now averages over 80 versus the 20 recorded in 1981. **And none of the drive-through improvements specified in the 1981**

permit have ever been completed. This is a serious compliance issue and it has been documented and submitted to DPD for code enforcement.

Over 25 on-site traffic surveys have been conducted over the past two school years. It is abundantly clear that the school creates a significant and extremely burdensome impact on traffic and congestion in this established and highly developed residential community. There have been no operational improvements or structural changes to the property or to its loading/unloading capability that have had any mitigating impact on traffic and parking conditions. Just the opposite, with every incremental increase in its enrollment comes a parallel increase in traffic and congestion. The institution's latest expansion proposal (MUP #2306429) has enrollment increasing another 10% to over 220. In fact, it is our understanding that the school has already accepted most of these students and has included them in their enrollment even though the project to accommodate them is far from finished – even further exacerbates the impact. It is little wonder that the school has traffic and parking problems. And **all** of these problems have literally been dumped onto the City's streets and City right of way with the introduction of curbside off-loading at the beginning of this school year.

The second important fact worth noting about City permit issued in 1981 is its documented restriction on enrollment growth. The permit and its associate Agreement to bring closure to a pending Hearing Examiner appeal is signed by the City, the school's owners, and the neighbors. It places a lid on enrollment of "120 with no more than 100 at any one time." The record shows that the school kept its enrollment within this constraint for nearly ten years but then made piecemeal additions over time to achieve their super-sized enrollment of 220 today. But the threshold permit level of 120/100 has never been adjusted, the school has never request relief from this threshold and the City had never granted any such adjustment. How was this allowed to happen? This is what the neighborhood is trying to find out. This was one of our principal questions we presented to the Seattle Hearing Examiner this summer when we appealed the school's latest expansion proposal. The Hearing Examiner response was narrowly focused and she ruled that the appeal could only deal with the new expansion project. The compliance issues were not discounted but simply not within the Hearing Examiners jurisdiction, or at least that was her ruling. The Examiner ordered that all matters related to Code compliance of existing operations be excluded from the proceedings and presented to DPD for code enforcement. The appellants in turn assembled a comprehensive set of reference materials and documented 12 individual code compliance complaints and presented the package to DPD on August 12, 2005. The enrollment lid is the first and foremost on the list. Now that the Hearing Examiner's decision had finally been released in mid October we fully expect the Code Enforcement Department at DPD to complete its investigation and then initiate enforcement action.

Discussion

The point of introducing all of this material is to demonstrate and highlight the fact that the traffic and parking problems associated with the Bertschi School are completely self-generated. The City recognized the shortfalls of the school's antiquated drive-through area from the very beginning and it mapped out a plan to bring it up to a point that it could meet the demand of 20 to 30 vehicles in a 15-minute window of time. And the City recognized that the neighborhood had a limited capacity to support an expanded student population. It thus placed a lid on enrollment of 120 with no more than 100 at any one time. But this permit specification has been breached.

The record shows that the drive-through never got the required upgrades. And even more critically the lid on enrollment has been totally overlooked. Now there are 70-90 vehicles approaching the drop-off zone during this same 15-minute window of time. The Bertschi School has permitted itself to grow beyond its means and grow beyond the capability of neighborhood.

With the introduction of curbside unloading (AND loading for that matter) the school has been allowed to absolve itself of its obligatory responsibilities customarily prescribed for a business of this size. Its entire staff, numbering over 40 (only 5-7 in 1981), competes for precious few parking spaces in this totally residential neighborhood. On a daily basis the Bertschi School is responsible for over 750 vehicle trips to this tight and constrained community nestled into the north end of Capitol Hill. The school drives an average of 115 vehicles into and out of its new curbside drop-off zone every morning. And even more show up in the afternoon looking for a parking space as parents or nannies must actually visit the classroom to sign out their child.

Conclusion

All in this neighborhood recognize that private schools like Bertschi seek to provide an educational service to the greater Seattle area but what is often overlooked is the fact this service comes at extreme expense to neighborhoods such as this. We are simply ill equipped to support the services that private institutions of this order and magnitude seem to command. The central problem is that the Bertschi School has outgrown its location. It has failed to provide a supporting infrastructure for an enrollment that grossly exceeds its permit threshold and for an enrollment that goes far beyond the vision of City planners and the neighborhood when it granted the daycare center a conditional approval to convert to a “non-graded” school with “no more than 100 students at any one time.”

SDOT approval that allows the Bertschi School to abandon its off-street drive-through and to use a substandard arterial for curbside drop-off is viewed as simply enabling an institution that is operating well beyond the scope of its permitted authority. In addition this new practice has serious public safety issues for pedestrians, bicyclists, and bus riders, young elementary school-aged children and private property. There are alternatives and it has been demonstrated that the drive-through area can be widened and elongated without compromising the landlord’s restrictions of its leased property at 2219 10th Avenue East. And with creative transportation planning the bulk of the single-student “school buses” that inundate this neighborhood can be drastically reduced. But first, the curbside idea, while inviting on some accounts, should be suspended in favor of more palatable, long-term solutions that the school should be expected to provide.