SAC Meeting – October 17, 2018

Andrew and Erin Cogswell

My name is Erin and my husband Andrew and I have been living in this neighborhood for 15 years. When it came time for us to buy our first house, the decision for us was very clear-we, wanted to live in Clayton Park West. The main reason for us was the fact that there was a P-9 school as well a high school right here in the neighborhood. Over time, we can both still whole heartedly agree that we made the right decision for us and our two daughters who currently attend this school. We take great pride in the fact that they are fortunate enough to attend such a great school and have made lifelong friendships here in our community. We don’t have any plans to move out of this neighborhood.

We are both very concerned and surprised about how often this school has appeared in the media over the last several months and what impact that might have on our daughters and our community. I like to save my voice for the things that really matter to me and for that reason, I feel that I needed to express my concerns tonight and perhaps gain some insight into what the future holds for us and this community. For us, we find it hard to find the negatives in having our daughters attend Park West.

This is a tight knit community that revolves and thrives around this P-9 school. Many families have multiple family members in attendance and this again enhances the cohesiveness of the school and the community feel. One of the up sides of the P-9 configuration is the “whole family” focus. I believe our current community culture is a **product** of this school. A few years ago it was predicted that the population in our community with school-aged children would decline over the coming years. One reason for this was that there was no additional land in which to further develop housing. I believe what was seriously overlooked was the **intrinsic value** of this school in this community. It is a desirable place to raise a family. Families want to move here and stay here. With such a diverse school population, the lessons that our children are learning about tolerance and acceptance here at Park West School are being taken home to their families after school. Those lessons are then spilling over into the community and making our community stronger. It’s a peaceful place to raise our children.

While picking up my daughters each day, I see the positive impact of junior high students here as they make their way home with their siblings at the end of each day. It also amazes me how many junior high students assist when it comes to extra-curricular as well as school events for the younger grades. Their enthusiasm to volunteer for these opportunities makes them great role models and will serve them very well in the coming years.

I believe that we can all agree that the school population exceeds the physical walls of this building and that portables are not a viable long term solution. What I don’t agree with in the short term is that my children’s academic performance is being compromised. They are thriving here. Although it is my understanding that some of the lower grades are currently slightly over cap, there has been positive progress made in addressing this issue by adding additional staff.

 I don’t see it being productive to dismantle this school for this reason in the short term if a long term solution could be met that would keep our students in our community. Especially in light of capital proposals that could see a Junior High being built within our community starting in 2020.

I believe that there is a lot of information that is required or should be considered before a decision could even be made with regards to Overcrowding.

# With regards to Overcrowding:

* If we are to look at the population of this school compared to the square footage, how do we compare to other communities in HRM?
* How fast is our school population growing compared to other communities?
* What are the factors that are driving that change?
* I think the address verification process was successful and should be implemented annually to maintain its effectiveness.
* If the desire is to smooth the school population between Clayton Park West, Clayton Park and Fairview, it is my understanding that the population in Clayton Park and Fairview are also not decreasing. What will also happen to the children that are going to be moving into our neighboring Rockingham South’s new development? That is going to put further pressure on the schools that service that area.

# There are Many Benefits of a Walking School

# Our students should live closer, not further from their school. Why bus or drive students to school, when suitable facilities (that do require some investment) are within walking distance? This promotes regular physical activity and removes cars from the road (both are really good things). For my family, academic performance is of utmost importance:

* This should be one of the prime factors determining a school’s success-not the size of the classrooms.
* While a reconfiguration that moves students to another location might temporarily solve overcrowding, will those students that are transferred continue to achieve academically
* Are Park West students performing well because families that put a high priority on academics are choosing to live in this area?
* What educational benefit would there be to changing the current configuration?
* What would programming look like if the grade configuration changed?
* If Park West School is performing at a high level relative to other schools within the HRM, then disrupting the current configuration is actually “punishing” it for being a successful model. The school population is high not only because the area is desirable for home owners, but also because of the academic performance of students. **We should be embracing and emulating a working model rather than punishing it.**

**A proposed extension to this school would be ideal and something that should be seriously explored. It would be ideal to have a school that meets our population ratio. Having a junior high built in our community as part of the Department of Education’s long term infrastructure plan would also be a viable solution.**

I also have some questions regarding this plan:

* How long would it take for an extension to be added? What is the process for having a junior high school developed in our neighborhood?
* In the short term, do families have the option of applying to another school outside of the community if they are not content with the overcrowding in the school?
* Could there be a cap put on the enrollment here at Park west for each grade for new families coming into the community until a long term solution could be achieved?

**It is my overall desire to have this community remain intact and for this process not to divide it. I believe that we need to look carefully at all of the pros and cons of a long term solution and not rush the process for a short term fix.**