

To: Municipality of Anchorage Planning Department
CC: Mike Abbott, ASD
Superintendent Carol Comeau, ASD
Mayor Dan Sullivan
Assembly Member Jennifer Johnston
Assembly Member Chris Birch
Senator Lisel McGuire
Senator Cathy Giessel
Senator Mike Hawker
Representative Bob Lynn
Kersten Johnston, Principal, SAHS
Art Isham, Chair, Planning & Zoning Commission
Nancy Pease, Planning & Zoning Commission
Sharon Ferguson, Planning Department
Diane Ingle, Director, DHHS
Janet Vietmeier, DHHS Deputy Director
Angela Chambers, Supervisor, Planning Department

From: Huffman/O'Malley Community Council

Date: March 18, 2011

Re: Case #2011-036

As you are aware, the area of South Anchorage High School was an established residential area long before the school's existence. Placing a high school in the middle of a quiet neighborhood was not a popular decision.

There were promises made to mollify the area residents that have not been kept, promises in the site plan and by the school district. Since the creation of the school, numerous issues have arisen. Before any further expansions occur within the school boundaries, these promises need to be kept and issues need to be resolved.

To address these issues, the Huffman/O'Malley Community Council has called a Special Meeting that will involve all interested parties and is asking the Planning & Zoning Commission to hold a Public Hearing on this matter.

Leyden Street

The residents of Leyden Street requested no access to SAHS from their neighborhood. PZC R #2000-096 called for pedestrian access to remain viable "through the design process". PZC R #2001-088 stated that pedestrian access would be created. There is now permanent access and a paved path from Leyden Street. As the residents feared, this school access point has created issues.

The Huffman/O'Malley Community Council was asked to assist the neighborhood in reducing the problems experienced in this area due to this permanent access. Parents drop off students at this entry; students use the streets for day parking to avoid paying parking fees; and expelled and suspended students use Leyden for parking to meet their school friends.

In 2008 and 2009, HOCC requested the installation of permanent “no school parking” signs along Leyden. Today, HOCC is requesting signage stating “No school parking or student drop off” along this street and enforcement from SAHS. The neighborhood preference is that this access be permanently closed.

Eastwind

Site plans approved for SAHS (PZC R #2001-088) showed an 80’ vegetative visual and audio screening buffer along the south, east and west property lines. A 40’ utility buffer runs along the south and west side of the property. The site plan approved showed replacement of this 80’ buffer with similar vegetation including native trees. The Anchorage School District agreed to provide a 6’ high chain link fence around this buffer.

Unfortunately, there was never an effort to re-vegetate this buffer, nor was this area maintained “undisturbed” as promised by ASD. A 4’ fence was placed 30” off the property boundary.

It appears that in the interim, clearing has been done to remove all growth and maintain a running trail in the utility corridor adjacent to the property line. SAHS runners use this utility easement/buffer and have set a precedent for its use. Consequently, this trail now receives heavy use, contrary to the original promise of ASD and the original site plan.

This neighborhood experiences great noise pollution. The school’s PA system includes buzzers and outdoor speakers, and is used throughout the day. The neighbors get to hear every announcement, and know what student has been called to the office. Quite a number of these neighbors have each erected solid 6’ fences in an effort to reduce noise pollution.

The neighborhood experiences lengthy evenings of light pollution. When this project was first brought to the Council, the lights, including to hockey rink and tennis courts, were to be on timers and turned off nightly at 10 PM. Currently, these bright floodlights are often left on throughout the night. Additionally, the parking lots and walking path from the school to the Eastwind entrance feature the same bright lighting.

A neighbor has made the following report: “Though it is spring break, the last three nights the entire campus (including tennis and hockey area) was thoroughly lit all night long. Last night the tennis/hockey lights were off during the evening, but around midnight they were switched on and stayed on until morning.” As the APD community liaison observed, when the lights are on, particularly on the courts and rink, it is perceived as available, regardless of posted hours. Year around problems include casual, middle-of-the-night games of soccer, football, baseball, hockey, skateboarding, dog training, kids gathering in the parking lot, and other activities. The summer break School Facility Campers do not and, for personal safety reasons, should not try to halt these activities. Calls to the police are not productive, as they do not have spare time to respond.”

The planned large ball field improvements will only exacerbate the problems faced by this neighborhood. Their lives are being negatively impacted on a regular basis.

Quite frankly, the neighborhood became discouraged when their voices were ignored throughout this process. They now fully expect the Municipality and the school district to successfully run roughshod over them, no matter what the ramifications are on their lives and properties.

Football and Baseball Field Improvements

The neighborhoods only learned of the planned football and baseball field improvements when several noticed a single page letter from SAHS Principal Kersten Johnston left on their porches and driveways. Upon realizing that more lighting, large scoreboards, public address systems and announcers, and 'visitors' bleachers and facilities are going to be added to that side of the school, they don't know whether to scream or cry.

This letter stated that the school intends to "progress from a practice field to a stadium facility and host varsity level sporting events". This is a very discouraging scenario for this besieged neighborhood.

The neighborhood has also only recently learned that the field improvements are to include artificial turf. They are additionally concerned with how this will affect prior and existing drainage problems.

Conclusion

The Huffman/O'Malley Community Council has promised these neighbors that we will attempt to ensure that the 80' buffer originally promised and approved on the original site plan will finally be created. This must include trees of an appropriate size and density to finally protect this neighborhood. All "trail maintenance" inside this 80' buffer must cease immediately, and the running trail currently used moved outside of this buffer. The promised fence must be installed, preferably at the perimeter of the 80' buffer and the rest of the school grounds. Signage must indicate appropriate trails. Planting should be done this spring before construction begins.

The lighting issue must be addressed. All lighting, including current installations, must be altered to decrease glare into the surrounding area, and must be on timers that shut off by 10 PM and can only be turned on in designated emergencies.

The noise issue must also be addressed, including the present system used by the school. There is no reason for a PA system to be used in a residential area. Any sound system used on the sports fields must be designed to face away from this neighborhood and all amplified noise must cease by 10 PM. As sound from even directional projection will reverberate, a courtesy to this neighborhood would have amplified sound stopped at 9 PM.

The drainage issue requires further study. As you may be aware, the creation of this school altered area drainage patterns. Artificial methods now protect the neighborhoods. Results of installation of artificial turf need to be fully understood before this project begins.

Until the original promises have been kept and assurances are in place to verify that the problems facing this neighborhood will finally be resolved, the HOCC will, in all likelihood, oppose any additions or expansions of any SAHS sports fields.

The following is from an Eastwind area neighbor: "It should be noted that homeowners are realistic about the daily disruptions inherent in living adjacent to a school. We expect and accept reasonable and normal traffic, activity and noise. However, none of us foresaw the proposed expansions that will significantly increase activity during evenings and weekends. This is a dense, residential area, not a semi-commercial use such as near Dimond and East Highs, nor a densely wooded area as surrounding Service. It should be treated as a residential area, with the same courtesies and considerations all good neighbors offer."

Also of concern is a pattern of ignoring the community. The lack of community notice

is indicative of this inattention. This project should have been introduced to the community, including the neighborhood, before any requests were made of Juneau or any plans were drawn. As the community has stated, having “a single piece of paper from the SAHS principal placed on our doorstep three days before the HOCC meeting **IS NOT** public notice”, and having fully-designed plans and funding in place “at the first actual community meeting **IS NOT** being responsive to the community”.

The following is from another Eastwind neighbor: “This is going to be a popular and heavily used sports facility. Why can’t it be placed in the sports field upgrades in the Minnesota and C Street area? This is my home. I don’t know how much more of this I can take.”

The HOCC will be attempting to resolve these issues before official decisions are made. To that end, we are holding a Special Meeting on Thursday, March 31, at 7 PM at the Christian Church of Anchorage. We also request that the Planning & Zoning Commission do the responsible thing and hold a true and actual Public Hearing on this Case 2011-036. A true Public Hearing is quite overdue for the neighborhoods surrounding the South Anchorage High School.

Thank you for your attention to these matters.

Christine Monette, President
Huffman/O'Malley Community Council