

REPORT OF THE RUSSELL SCHOOL NEIGHBORS COMMITTEE
ON THE RESULTS OF THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD QUESTIONNAIRE
CONCERNING USE OF THE RUSSELL SCHOOL SITE

SEPTEMBER 1974

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November 15, 1974

To: - Residents of the Russell School Neighborhood
- Cambridge School Committee
- Cambridge City Council

During the past few years, the Russell School has changed from a vital and vibrant contributor to the life of its surrounding neighborhood to a decaying and dangerous source of neighborhood decline. Where school children and families previously played, broken glass, cracked concrete, and vermin prevent safe and beneficial recreation. Where holiday pictures gaily decorated the school's windows, unpainted and loose plywood and broken glass are now the dominant characteristics of the school's facade.

In response to the declining condition of the school and its effects on our community, several neighbors have formed the Russell School Neighbors Committee. The purpose of our committee is to improve the condition of the school site. The first activity we undertook was a survey of the neighborhood's interest in and concern for the school's condition and eventual uses of the school building and yard. The attached report is a summary of our findings.

Several of our findings will guide the future activities of our committee.

- The neighborhood is very interested in what happens to the school; 81% of the respondents were "very interested."
- While 74% of the households did not use the site within the last year, 73% would use the site for recreation if it were improved.

We hope that you will review the results of our survey and help us in improving the effects of the Russell School in our neighborhood.

The Russell School Neighbors Committee

INTRODUCTION

The Russell School Neighbors Committee was set up through the communications network of the Neighborhood Ten Association. Their newsletter started a pool of names of people interested in the fate of the Russell School site in the summer of 1972 when the move to the Tobin School was imminent. The Russell Committee came into being on its own in February, 1974 when the members began meeting regularly. The Committee feels strongly that the site should be put to productive use rather than continuing as an eyesore and safety hazard for the neighborhood. It was decided that the most reasonable and useful way in which to approach city officials responsible for the site and for changes to it would be with some positive neighborhood opinions in hand. The Committee is concerned in furthering the development of the site with the interests of all the residents of the area in mind.

To accomplish this goal, the Committee devised a questionnaire to sample neighborhood opinion. A copy of the questionnaire and its accompanying cover letter are attached to the end of the report as Appendix I. The intent of the questionnaire was two-fold: to gather opinions on possible uses of the site; and to gather enough information on the respondents to make the opinions expressed understandable and usable in context. In the latter case, we felt it might be important to see what types of people would use the site (children, adults), what type of people have strong objections to certain uses of the site (home-owners, people living near the site), etc. We also thought it extremely important to compare responses from people living very near the school site, on Larch and Grozier Roads, with responses from people living further away, to see if there were any major differences in expressed attitudes.

607 questionnaires* were sent out in the first week of May to residents in the area bounded by Brattle Street and Fresh Pond Parkway and Aberdeen Avenue (west side only) and Lakeview Avenue (both sides). 252 questionnaires were returned, 78 from residents on Larch and Grozier and 174 from residents

* This number represents successful mailings and does not include ones returned by the post office. Mailings were taken from the voting list, updated by members of the Committee.

living a block or more away from the site. This return represents 87% for Larch and Grozier, and 34% for farther away, 42% overall.

RESULTS**

Expressed interest of those who returned the questionnaire was high, as can be expected of people who took the time to complete it. Overall, 81% were "very interested" in what happens to the site. Interest was higher among close neighbors -- 94% for Larch and Grozier. 71% of respondents are homeowners (64% on Larch and Grozier, 74% farther away). The length of time people have lived in the neighborhood indicates a stable population that will indeed be using the site, if possible, for a number of years. Figures were very similar for both Larch and Grozier and farther away, so only the totals are summarized below:

<u>Number of Years</u>	<u>% of Respondents</u> (252 total)
0-4	23%
5-9	17%
10-14	8%
15-24	16%
25-49	23%
50+	9%
No Answer	4%

The make-up of households of respondents is of interest to help predict what age groups would use the site recreationally if it were available. The households are about evenly split between those with and without children -- overall, 53% with no children, 47% with children, 34% having two or more children. In spite of the dilapidated character of the playground and possible danger for users, such as broken glass, we asked about current use of the school playground by neighbors. Overall during the past year, 74%

** For a tabulation of all results, see Appendix II.

never used it, 8% used it between one and fifteen times, 10% used it between 15 and 50 times, and 8% used it more than 50 times, many of these daily. Figures for Larch and Grozier usage are higher, showing more use: 60% never, 9% one to fifteen times, 14% fifteen to fifty times, and 17% more than fifty times. In sharp contrast, when neighbors were asked what groups would use the site recreationally (if it were developed), 37% predicted use by several different age groups within one household. 65% said that children in the household would use it, and 62% said that adults in the household would use it. Only 27% said they would not use it at all. These replies show a staggering difference between the current use of an unattractive site by a minority of people in the neighborhood and a predicted active use of the site by a majority of residents, if it were developed for recreation.

The opinions as to future use of the site which the respondents were requested to express concerned four areas which seemed possible for development there: housing, recreation, city administration, and community services. Realizing that some feelings in the neighborhood are very strong, we tried to get at undesirable uses in two ways: by asking respondents to rank the possible uses in order of their preference, thereby allowing them to omit uses they consider undesirable; and by asking them to specify any use to which they had strong objections. Listing the strong objections first will help clarify the results of ranked uses.

	<u>Larch & Grozier</u>	<u>Farther Away</u>	<u>Total</u>
Strong objections to:			
Housing	46%	25%	32%
Recreation	4%	4%	4%
City Administration	4%	11%	9%
Community Services	10%	7%	8%

Total first choices for possible use of the site favor recreation with 52%, then housing with 35%, followed by community services with 7%, and lastly, city administration with 6%. It is interesting, however, to see the breakdown of

first, second, and "no answer" for Larch and Grozier versus farther away. Although recreation is the first choice for both groups, it is more favored among Larch and Grozier residents (59% vs. 50%). Housing is the second choice for both groups, but is less favored on Larch and Grozier (28% vs. 39%) and has more objections to it (46% vs. 25%).

	Larch & Grozier			Farther Away		
	1st	2nd	no. ans.	1st	2nd	no ans.
Housing	28%	21%	13%	39%	20%	14%
Recreation	59%	15%	15%	50%	22%	18%
City Administration	7%	19%	28%	5%	14%	40%
Community Services	6%	27%	36%	6%	17%	47%

In summary of these stated preferences and objections, it is clear that while preference for recreational use of the site is solid but not overwhelming, that objection to use of the site for housing is very strong, especially among residents on Larch and Grozier. Opinions on combinations of uses was solicited, but only 9% of residents on Larch and Grozier, and 11% from farther away, stated a preference for a combination of uses.

While realizing that a preliminary sampling of opinions such as this one cannot provide hard answers, we still wanted to get as much feedback as we could. We, therefore, predicated housing and recreational alternatives to sample opinion. If the site were to be used for housing, overall 42% preferred single-family housing, 31% two-family housing, 12% row housing, and 15% did not reply.

In recreation, overall expressed preference was for athletics of some sort (the questionnaire listed "tennis courts," "basketball courts," and "other" as athletic alternatives) with 49% giving their first choice to one of these, most of them to tennis (32% or 65% of the 49%). A park (unstructured open space) ranked next with 35%, then a playground (17%). There is a difference in preference between residents on Larch and Grozier and those living farther away: on Larch and Grozier, the first choice is a park (37%), second athletics (32% of these, tennis 28%); and the third a playground (15%). For residents

living farther away from the site, athletics ranks first (56% of these, tennis 33%); a park second (34%); and a playground third (17%).

One final opinion which was solicited was whether to demolish the existing building and build a new one or, to renovate the existing building if a use requiring a building were to be undertaken. Unfortunately, the question was not worded carefully enough to validate the opinions expressed, since no issues such as cost or appropriateness of the building to a different use were mentioned. 50% prefer to renovate the existing building; 33% prefer to demolish it and rebuild; 17% expressed no opinion. We do not consider these results valid for the situation at hand as we are informed of it, but included them as a matter of interest.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Other suggestions made once or more in the area of recreation were a tot lot (which we considered a part of the playground), ice skating, hockey, a pool, soccer, volley ball, and paddle tennis. Suggestions in the area of community services were varied: diagnostic center for school students; school for the educable retarded; a community center with day care and meeting rooms; a small community library; adult education facility; community theater; a teacher resource center; a little city hall; a hospital clinic; services for the elderly; a parking area for residents; and vegetable garden plots.

CONCLUSION

We are including as Appendix III selected comments from the questionnaires which we feel represent the range and intensity of concern about a positive utilization of the Russell School site for the neighborhood. The whole point of the Committee, the questionnaire, and the preparation of its results is to demonstrate the depth of interest in the neighboring community, and to insist on community involvement in its deployment. The most potent comment on all the questionnaires is: "I hope these ideas of the neighborhood won't be thrown in a basket and forgotten about like most local ideas."

Russell School Neighbors Committee - Neighborhood Ten Association

Dear Neighbor:

The Russell School site between Larch Road and Grozier Road will probably be turned back to the city by the School Department within a few months. It will then be up to the Cambridge City Council to determine the future use of the school building and the land around it. The abandoned school building is presently in serious disrepair and is a safety and health hazard, as a result of many factors including broken glass and rats.

We need to have specific suggestions of uses that you feel would improve the quality of life in this section of the city. It is in all our interests to turn this circumstance into an advantage for the community, rather than a disadvantage. The more questionnaires returned, the greater the impact of the responses will be on city officials. Please return your questionnaire as soon as possible in the enclosed envelope.

Russell School Neighbors Committee

Marie Adams	Robert Gray
Barbara Armistead	Mary Hazard
Diana Barrett	Florence Ladd
Ernest Ciampa	Peter Merrill
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Theresa Faloney	David Mundel

1. Where do you live in relation to the school :
☐ Larch Road or Grozier Road
☐ A block or more away
2. How interested are you in what happens to this site?
☐ Very interested
☐ Slightly interested
☐ Not interested
3. How many people are in your household?
☐ Number of Adults
☐ Number of Children
4. How many times in the last year has your household used the site for recreation?

5. If future use of the site is consistent with the present zoning ordinance, options for use seem to be limited to the following :

- Housing - one or two family or row housing (17 lots possible) - (high-rise housing is not presently allowed)
- Recreation
- Administrative offices for city agencies
- Other uses related to community services

Please rank these 4 uses in order of your preference.
(Mark "1", "2", "3", and "4" in the designated boxes.)

- ☐ Housing (one or two family or row)
- ☐ Recreation
- ☐ City Administration
- ☐ Other community services (specify below)

If you prefer a combination of uses, specify :

6. Do you strongly object to any particular use? Please specify : _____
7. If the site were used for housing which would you most prefer? (Check one.)
- ☐ One family
 - ☐ Two family
 - ☐ Row housing (might be used for condominiums)
8. If the site were used for recreation, how would you rank the following uses, in order of preference? (Place a "1" in the box opposite your first choice, "2" opposite the second, etc.)
- ☐ Unstructured open space, as a park
 - ☐ Athletics
 - ☐ Tennis courts
 - ☐ Basketball courts
 - ☐ Other: specify _____
 - ☐ Playground
9. What age groups in your household would use the site recreationally? (Check as many as apply.)
- ☐ Under 4 years
 - ☐ 4 - 12 years
 - ☐ Teenagers
 - ☐ Adults
10. If the site were used for a city office or for community services, it would have to be decided whether to renovate the existing building or to demolish it and build a new one. Which alternative would you prefer?
- ☐ Demolish and rebuild
 - ☐ Renovate
11. How many years have you lived in the neighborhood?

12. Are you :
- ☐ A home-owner
 - ☐ A non-owner

(Over)

Any other comments?

☐

Would you be willing to help in this project?

You need not sign this questionnaire, but if you wish, do so here :

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Address: _____

APPENDIX II - TABULATION OF RESULTS

Part 1 - Identification of Respondents

Question Number:	2	Household	Years in Neighborhood	11	12
Larch & Grozier	"Very interested" 94%	No Children 59% Children 41% 2+ Children 30%	0-4 21% 5-9 24% 10-14 7% 15-24 15% 25-49 23% 50+ 7% no ans. 3%	Owners 64% Non-owners 32%	
Farther Away	"Very interested" 75%	No Children 50% Children 50% 2+ Children 36%	0-4 24% 5-9 14% 10-14 8% 15-24 16% 25-49 24% 50+ 10% no ans. 4%	Owners 74% Non-owners 25%	
Totals	"Very interested" 81%	No Children 53% Children 47% 2+ Children 34%	0-4 23% 5-9 17% 10-14 8% 15-24 16% 25-49 23% 50+ 9% no ans. 4%	Owners 71% Non-owners 27%	

Question Number:	Current Use	Projected Use	
Larch & Grozier	Never 60% 1-15 times 9% 15-50 times 14% 50+ times 17%	No one 29% Under 4 yrs. 6% 4-12 yrs. 24% Teenagers 17% Adults 59%	Multiple 32%
Farther Away	Never 80% 1-15 times 7% 15-50 times 8% 50+ times 5%	No one 26% Under 4 yrs. 14% 4-12 yrs. 29% Teenagers 22% Adults 63%	Multiple 40%
Totals	Never 74% 1-15 times 8% 15-50 times 10% 50+ times 8%	No one 27% Under 4 yrs. 12% 4-12 yrs. 28% Teenagers 25% Adults 62%	Multiple 37%

APPENDIX II - TABULATION OF RESULTS

Part 2 - Opinions of Respondents

Question Number:	Projected Use Preference					6	7
	5	1st	2nd	No	Objections to:	Housing:	
Larch & Grozier	Housing	28%	21%	13%	Housing 46%	Single 50%	
	Rec.	59%	21%	15%	Rec. 4%	2-fam. 33%	
	City Ad.	7%	19%	28%	City Ad. 4%	Row 5%	
	Comm. Ser.	6%	27%	36%	Comm. Ser. 10%	No ans. 12%	
Farther Away	Housing	39%	20%	14%	Housing 25%	Single 39%	
	Rec. .	50%	22%	18%	Rec. 4%	2-fam. 30%	
	City Ad.	5%	14%	40%	City Ad. 11%	Row 15%	
	Comm. Ser.	6%	17%	47%	Comm. Ser. 7%	No ans. 16%	
Totals	Housing	35%	20%	10%	Housing 32%	Single 42%	
	Rec.	52%	20%	17%	Rec. 4%	2-fam. 31%	
	City Ad.	6%	15%	37%	City Ad. 9%	Row 12%	
	Comm. Ser.	7%	20%	43%	Comm. Ser. 8%	No ans. 15%	

Question Number:	Projected Recreation Preference				10	
	8					
Larch & Grozier	Recreation:				Demolish	40%
	Park			37%	Renovate	46%
	Athletics			32%	No ans.	14%
	Tennis	28%				
	Basketball	5%				
	Other	-				
	Playground		15%			
Farther Away	Recreation:				Demolish	29%
	Park			34%	Renovate	53%
	Athletics			56%	No ans.	18%
	Tennis	33%				
	Basketball	13%				
	Other	10%	17%			
	Playground					
Totals	Recreation:				Demolish	33%
	Park			35%	Renovate	50%
	Athletics			49%	No ans.	17%
	Tennis	32%				
	Basketball	10%				
	Other	7%				
	Playground		17%			

APPENDIX III

Representative selected comments from residents concerning what they would like to see in this location:

"I feel strongly that the building should be torn down as renovation would be prohibitively expensive and the area in its present condition, is an eyesore as well as a danger. In its place I would like to see a combination of open space and planned recreation. It is imperative that this occur soon, and that no use be made of the area which would further congest the neighborhood."

"If 17 or 34 families should be housed on the present site, without their own off-street parking, it would be murder!"

"The open space around the school is currently used by children in the neighborhood. This use should be strengthened and maintained. Activities and uses which should be planned are those which would not attract large groups, create more auto traffic, or activities which exclude certain age groups."

"This site should be cleared as soon as possible. The building and its surrounding area are very dangerous to small children at present. The site should be converted to purposes beneficial to the many small children that it attracts."

"I feel that the greatest consideration should be given to residential housing or to activities which will not change the character of the neighborhood. This area is one of the very few livable areas in Cambridge with regard to space, noise, greenery, privacy, etc. Fresh Pond is nearby, and could be developed for pure recreation, athletics, etc."

"Rehabilitate the present structure into apartments for Condominium ownership -- put the property back on the tax rolls."

"I am concerned about the land being used in a way that will preserve some greenery and community feeling. If it is used without consideration for these factors, I hope it will benefit the less affluent in greater Cambridge, i.e., a half-way house."

"Keep the number of people to a minimum."

"I cannot understand why the Russell School has been idle for so long and become windowless, and why there is such motivation to destroy every building rather than research its uses . . . Is there no one else who can see the value of brick versus the cost of reconstruction?"

"First choice would be a combination of park and recreation with green areas plus (depending on land available) 2 - 4 tennis courts and 1 - 2 basketball courts, garden plots, a fountain, benches and enclosed playground for toddlers."

"First choice would be a combination part and playground for younger children similar to the one on St. Paul's Street in Brookline. Second choice would be housing with large lots and off street parking, plus a smaller version of the above."

"We think that recreation on the site is a must. We have two little children and no place for them to play. It also would be an even "closer" neighborhood if a nice recreation/park gathering place was provided -- this is important in a big city like Cambridge."

"Generate tax income to broaden the base. Sell house lots to Cambridge residents only. Require architecture in keeping with the neighborhood, and require off-street parking."

"To help fight inflation and the high cost of food, we vote that the area be made into garden plots similar to the "Victory Gardens" of World War II and to those on the Fenway."

"The successful integration of any site development into the neighborhood, is going to depend on how it is designed and built. It is imperative that the neighborhood committee, not the city administration, be "the client." In my view, the real success of any recreational use of the site is going to depend on having something there to act as a magnet to draw people into encounters and use of the area. There should be things for people of all ages to do at the same time without interfering with each other. Perhaps we could find out what community services the city supports, to see if any would benefit this neighborhood."

"We believe that the nearest neighbors should have the greatest influence on the final choices."

"I feel that there is sufficient recreational space within the area. The emphasis should be on housing which conforms to the needs of the neighborhood."

"Strongly advise that 90% consideration be given to those who are hearing and seeing the area, and to real Cambridge needs. Forget entirely about parking and inevitable future irritations whatever the use."

"Would hope to see land used mostly for recreation -- a combined use of quiet, open spaces where it is pleasant to just sit or stroll, lots of planting, trees, shrubs, and flowers. Isolated from this, a tot lot, and one or two tennis courts, then, if it can be fit in, some space for neighborhood garden plots."

"I hope the land will remain open -- the land is congested enough already. If the city decided to use it for city services (administrative) it would increase traffic and reduce the residential atmosphere."

"The neglect of the school has been a great problem to me in the selling of my house."

"What about community garden plots?"

"It is most important that no additional families be added to an area which is already seriously over-crowded and noisy. There are a number of young and teenage children in the neighborhood who already use the school for playground and sports, not to mention adults who would like to use it as a park. It would greatly improve the quality of the neighborhood and the life of the residents if the school could be turned into a park, playground, and sports area."

"Very, very interested in seeking something done, as I consider it an eye-sore every time I look out the window. I think it should be residential."

"Grozier Road is becoming car congested. Whatever is done it should not add to this situation as it contributes to unsafe conditions for children. The serenity of the neighborhood will continue to deteriorate. Also, a park should not only cater to children and athletes, but also to elderly who might enjoy a tranquil place to sit on a hot afternoon or a hot summer day!"

"Whatever it is used for, I hope the grounds will be kept clean, mowed, etc."

"Condominiums would too severely change the neighborhood."

"Tearing down and rebuilding should be a last resort."

Report on the Russell School Neighborhood

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