

# Taking the Politics out of Facility Planning

It's a common facility planning method . . . the principals, teachers, maintenance staff, parent groups and others are asked for their lists of needed improvements. A consultant is hired to assess facilities. Then a consultant estimates costs of the improvements. A task force of citizens, parents and community leaders is assembled to review and tweak the list. The improvements are often prioritized by the task force. The prioritized, priced list is presented to the board, which tweaks the list a little more. Sometimes the board sends it back to the task force for modification. Sometimes the citizens are polled as to the likelihood of support. Finally, the board approves the plan and presents it to the public as a grass roots program with cost estimates developed by a professional.

What's wrong with this process? It's laced with politics and subjective judgment. Principals and teachers have different ideas of adequacy. Many ask for what they want, which is often more than they need. Maintenance staff will lobby for replacing as many systems as they can to minimize future repair work. Coaches, fine arts instructors, etc. are lobbying for improvements to their areas. The task force prioritization is done by subjective ranking. The board will often add a few pet projects. The citizen poll is based on subjective judgment. The public will be asked to support a bond based on the opinions of the task force, administrators, consultants, etc.

Problem is, there is little objective justification that the public can relate to. Intentions are sincere in the process, but there are few objective controls. The district staff typically knows most of what is needed. But, it only takes a few frivolous improvements or the perception of unfairness to sink an improvement program and damage the credibility of the district.

The answer is the use of empirical benchmarks. Empirical benchmarks take the politics out of facility planning. Be warned though . . . many don't like the system because it is very difficult to manipulate.

## The Process

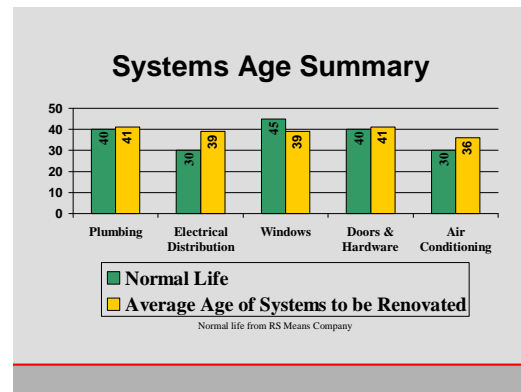
### Step 1 - Establish areas of benchmarks with the board.

The board should first approve the areas of benchmarks. Benchmarks should be kept fairly simple and in terms the public can understand. They should be measurable. The following are major categories of benchmarks. There are often exceptions, but they must be justified with objectivity and not political lobbying.

1. General building area (sq.ft. per student). Sub categories such as utilization ratios, circulation ratios, etc. can also be used. But don't get too complicated. Compare district facilities to planning standards and peer districts.
2. Individual space size. Compare classrooms, labs, and support space to standards, such as the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (CEFPI).
3. Establish standard number of spaces at each campus such as labs, gyms, rehearsal rooms, etc. This can be done by

polling peer school districts to establish number of facilities benchmarks (i.e. 1 gym per 500 students, 1 music rehearsal area per 650 students, 1 science lab per 180 students, etc.). This is an important step in that it provides controls for number of spaces and it serves as a reference citizens relate to better than planning standards.

4. Systems/material age. Compare actual age to normal life. Agree that only systems beyond or near their normal life are to be replaced. If a system is worn out well before normal life, there is a malfunction or maintenance problem. This should be corrected quickly to avoid issues with inferior maintenance procedures. Information sources are R.S. Means and the Association of Physical Plant Administrators.



*By using normal life benchmarks for materials and systems, a district can demonstrate why materials/systems need replacement. A simple bar graph can demonstrate that major systems are beyond their normal life. This is helpful in convincing the public that the buildings have been maintained properly, it's just that time is up for some systems.*

5. Code and regulatory compliance. There's no measurement here. It either complies or it doesn't. Ask the board to agree to put any noncompliant items on the list. This includes building codes, accessibility, life safety code, and state facility standards.
6. High impact features. Measures facility features that have proven to impact student achievement. These are lighting, temperature control, indoor air quality, acoustics, space and technology. These can and should be measured in quantifiable terms.
7. Site facilities. The same concept can be applied to site features. Age of materials, site area, parking spaces, accessibility, number of playing fields, etc.
8. Operating cost. Compare utility cost per sq.ft. to industry standards and peers. A good tool is AS&U's annual maintenance cost report. It is important to also consider the cost per student. Consider the number of custodians (sq. ft. per custodian).

It's important to use peer district comparisons where possible. Citizens relate more to peer comparisons than comparisons to state or association standards.

## Step 2 – Benchmark Education

Educate those involved in planning (citizens, administrators, teachers, etc.) about the benchmarks and that they will be followed. Common knowledge that benchmarks are in place will stop most frivolous requests. Require any requests beyond the benchmarks to be justified by the proposer. Even more effective is telling all involved that requests beyond benchmarks must be justified to the board by the proposer.

## Step 3 – Assessment/Planning Process

Execute the planning and assessment process preferred by the district, but apply the benchmarks to the process. Poll district staff, have the assessment done, assemble task forces, hold community meetings, have tours, hold board workshops, price the improvements, etc. Educate all involved about the benchmarks. Keep the benchmarks in simple terms. Stay within the benchmarks. Finalize the improvement plan, showing how each single improvement is justified with a benchmark. Resist the temptation to slip in a few projects that aren't justified. Improvements can be prioritized by extent of deviation from benchmarks.

## Step 4 - Present improvements to public.

Present and sell the program to the public in the desired method. Show the empirical justification for each improvement in simple terms. It is important to advertise the use of benchmarks to the public.

## Step 5 – Keep the benchmarks in place

After the bond passes, keep the benchmarks in place. Resist the common tendency to ignore benchmarks during detailed planning, after funding has been secured. Use the benchmarks to project future needs. Tell the public that the controls will be kept in place. They like the demonstration of fiscal responsibility.

## Benefits

1. It works . . . 100% of referendums have passed using this system.
2. Ensures most critical needs are met.
3. Ensures facility equity.
4. Ensures basic needs are met without overbuilding.
5. Ensures credibility.
6. Corrects deferred maintenance.
7. Eliminates frivolous pet projects.
8. Demonstrates fiscal responsibility.
9. More efficient facilities.

## Case Studies

**Classrooms:** The science department was lobbying hard for more labs. Because of political connections, they just about had everyone convinced it was the most critical need. Empirical benchmarks revealed that there was a moderate need for science labs, but there was a more critical need for standard classrooms. Both are under construction.

**Gyms:** A district was not having much luck convincing citizens that each elementary needed a play gym separate from the cafeteria. Peer comparison revealed that 90% of the schools in peer districts have separate play gyms. The gyms are now under construction.

**Tennis Courts:** A district was having difficulty convincing the public that more tennis courts should be involved in bond program. Benchmarking revealed that the district's court count was 60% under peers. The tennis team is now using their new courts.

**Fewer Classrooms:** A principal was lobbying hard for 12 more classrooms. Benchmarks indicated only 8 were needed, and the board approved only 8. There were public comments during voting that this demonstrated fiscal responsibility. The 8 rooms constructed 6 years ago have proven to be adequate to this day.

**Meeting Basic Needs vs Political Limits:** A district had historically polled citizens for a total bond cost they would support and then developed improvements up to that amount. In the most recent bond, the district had identified 60 million as this "political" limit. Benchmarking demonstrated a basic need of much more. Citizens were convinced to the tune of 89 million!

**Maintenance Credibility:** One district was having a little bit of a problem with the perception that facilities had not been properly maintained. Comparison to systems/materials normal life benchmarks demonstrated that the district was getting more life out of systems than normal. The district was able to demonstrate the quality of their maintenance program and the bond passed.

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