

One way or another, they want a new school



Boston parents unhappy with the limited educational options for their children want the city to include a new school in the plans for the redevelopment of the Government Center Garage. (David L. Ryan/ Globe Staff)

By Jesse Nankin

Globe Correspondent / March 22, 2009

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Bill Jacobson lives in the North End with his wife and two young children. His 4-year-old daughter is set to start pre-kindergarten this fall, but she won't be able to attend the neighborhood's school, or any other Boston Public School, unless she gets off the waiting list.

Jacobson didn't score a spot for her in the Boston Public School's lottery system, so his daughter may have to wait until next year, and be bused to a kindergarten in another part of the city - a prospect he finds frustrating when there's a school close by.

Scores of families scattered throughout the North End, Beacon Hill, and the West End are having to decide between leaving Boston, seeing their children go to public schools well outside of their neighborhoods, or sending them to a private school, an option that for some will only become more out of reach in the current economy.

"This is a great city to live in and it's only getting better," Jacobson said. "There just are not enough seats for the growing number of families who want to stay downtown. They don't have good options, so they leave. It's a shame."

Jacobson and other local parents are turning the playgroup chatter about schools

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The coalition's mission is to work together with the city to add a new public school in downtown Boston, if not for their children then at least for the next generation.

"A lot of people have the same fears and thoughts about the lack of accessibility to public education," said Rebecca Griffin, a North End resident since 2000 and the mother of three young children. But before the coalition, "people had just been complaining and not doing anything."

Since coming together, the group has gathered signatures from 165 families and several letters of support from local organizations. They have also met with Mayor Thomas Menino and Carol R. Johnson, the superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, and gathered the support of City Councilors Michael Ross and Sal LaMattina.

All too aware of looming budget cuts and a fragile economic environment, the parents know that getting approval for a new school will not be easy. According to Dot Joyce, spokeswoman for the mayor's office, with finances the way they are, a new school is not in the plans right now.

But the coalition sees a glimmer of hope: They want to include a school in the plans for the redevelopment of the Government Center Garage. By creating a private-public partnership, building a new school may not be so far out of reach.

The location within the walk zones for the three neighborhoods makes it an ideal spot, too. Families want the ability to walk their children to school, just as they can walk to work. It's one of the advantages, not to mention its environmental appeal, of living in a city, Jacobson said.

The mayor and the superintendent seemed receptive to the idea during their meeting with the coalition in late February and appreciated that this was an organized and collaborative effort between three neighborhoods, said Chiara Rhouate, one of the leading members of the coalition and a resident of the West End, a neighborhood that has been without a school since its redevelopment in the late 1950s.

"We left the meeting feeling good, and with some hope," she said

Rhouate noted, however, the mayor's focus on the overall low numbers of downtown children attending public school versus private school.

It's a catch-22. The numbers are low because there aren't enough area public schools for this age group, said Beacon Hill resident Robert Whitney. "If you build it, they will come!"

Superintendent Johnson said she was pleased to see such enthusiasm for public education, and that she is committed to working collaboratively to meet the needs of their children.

Still, this does not necessarily mean a new facility. The superintendent and the mayor's office plan to continue meeting with the coalition - another meeting is scheduled for April - but there are several other options to explore to create better access to schools, including redistricting, said Martha Pierce, the mayor's education adviser.

Pierce added that the superintendent and the mayor have had no conversations with the developer, Raymond Property Co., need more information about what is being proposed.

Justine Griffin, spokeswoman for the development project, said that Raymond

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direction from the city on the subject.

Members of the coalition plan to attend the developer's upcoming public meeting to discuss the project on March 25.

Ross sees the Government Center Garage project as a "tremendous opportunity" for the city to build on the success stories of the three existing downtown elementary schools - the Eliot, Hurley, and Quincy schools - and to resolve what he referred to as the greatest problem the public school system has seen in 30 years.

He criticized the city for failing to add a school to Beacon Hill when an Emerson College building was put up for sale several years ago.

"Public education is meant to be for everyone, and downtown parents have run out of choices for schools," Ross said. "Every school downtown has a waiting list."

People who passed on public education in the past are coming back because the economy is getting worse, the schools are getting better, and people want to stay downtown, Ross said. "There is no reason for the city not to do it."

While the group is focusing its efforts on this particular project, they are open to other ideas as well. "Our coalition wants a school, period," Rhouate said.

And because the Government Center Garage project could have a five-to-10-year timeline, the coalition recognizes that they may need to choose another spot.

The Beacon Hill Civic Association, of which Whitney is a board member, has taken a formal position to support a new school, though it's not specifying a location. The West End Civic Association has similar plans.

A school is such a central part of the community and life force, it affects the neighborhood's identity, Whitney said. "The idea is just try to find someplace and bring back some feeling of a neighborhood."

The Big Dig and Greenway projects reconnected these three neighborhoods and a school will only strengthen the link, Jacobson said.

"The city put a lot of effort into making this a place people want to live. Now it's time to finish the job with a new school," he said. ■

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