



North Central Texas Council Of Governments

TO: Federal Highway Administration

DATE: May 31, 2016

FROM: Karla Weaver, AICP
Program Manager

SUBJECT: Task 2b: Land Banking Programs and Best Practices Research

The purpose of this memo is to present a review of land banking programs and best practice research that was conducted by North Central Texas Council of Government (NCTCOG) staff in fulfillment of the terms of the 2014 Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) planning grant. The following section provides an overview of the TIGER grant that was awarded to NCTCOG, including the challenges it addresses, and the goals and accompanying tasks of the grant. Subsequent sections include an introduction to land banking for future school facilities, an overview of land banking best practices, and several case studies of land banking programs in the region.

BACKGROUND

The Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex is one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country, putting tremendous strain on the region's infrastructure—including transportation and school systems. The region's population is projected to increase from 7.2 million in 2017 to 10.7 million in 2040.¹ During this period, the number of school-age children (5 to 17 years) is estimated to increase by more than 750,000. There are currently 1,320,000 school-age children in the metroplex.² To accommodate this growth, hundreds of schools will need to be built or renovated. The location of those schools will have a tremendous impact on how children get to school and the region's transportation system overall.

Building upon previous coordination efforts with school districts in the region, the Regional Transportation Council (RTC) adopted a policy to support school districts in 2013. NCTCOG applied for and was awarded a 2014 TIGER planning grant. The goals of the grant are four-fold: (1) encourage interagency coordination; (2) address land use-transportation problems and school siting; (3) plan for transportation safety in school locations; and (4) plan for transportation options and accessibility. Various sub-tasks were identified to achieve each goal.

¹ NCTCOG 2040 Population Projections.

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). *S0101: Age and Sex, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates* [Data file].
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The second goal, “address land use-transportation problems and school siting,” is supported by the follow sub-tasks:

- a) Review state legislation and policies related to school siting requirements and land banking programs.
- b) Research land banking programs and best practices.**
- c) Develop a framework for a program for planning, establishing, replenishing, and maintaining acquisition funds and/or land banking for school siting.
- d) Coordinate independent school district (ISD), local government, and regional demographic projections for future demand for schools and housing.
- e) Identify partnerships and funding sources.
- f) Create summary memos resulting from research, review, and process conducted in items a through e, at the end of each sub-task.

This memo focuses on Task 2b, and the findings that resulted from the review of land banking programs and best practices.

INTRODUCTION TO LAND BANKING FOR FUTURE SCHOOLS

School siting is the process by which a community decides where to locate schools. This process occurs through the construction of a new school, the consolidation of existing schools, and the layout of the school site.

Historically, schools were located at the physical and social center of neighborhoods and communities. The location of these neighborhood schools protected children from heavy automobile traffic, and they were sited to accommodate children walking and biking to school. Since the 1970s, however, school planning has paralleled commercial development trends, leading to mega-schools located along highways and major arterial roadways on the edge of communities, where land is less expensive and easier to assemble.

One of the key barriers to building community-centered schools is finding sites of an adequate size, at a price the school district can afford.

Of the five school districts surveyed in preparation of the memos for Task 2, all use informal acreage standards during the site acquisition process.³ Most of these standards are reminiscent of the outdated guidelines from the Council of Educational Facility Planners International (today the Association for Learning Environments) as follows: elementary schools – 10 acres plus one acre for every 100 students; middle schools – 20 acres plus one acre for every 100 students; high schools – 30 acres plus one acre for every 100 students. However,

³ These school districts included Arlington ISD, Fort Worth ISD, Frisco ISD, Irving ISD, and Venus ISD.

these guidelines were rescinded in 2004. Current thinking suggests that school site size should reflect educational program needs rather than arbitrary acreage standards.

Beyond the school building, districts must consider athletic facilities, staging areas for buses, parking, buffer zones, site constraints such as utility easements, and landscaping requirements. The more elements there are that require land, the larger the site needs to be, and the more difficult it becomes to centrally locate the school. Districts are tempted to look for land on the urban fringe because it's cheaper and less limited than potential sites within the city.⁴ Since sites that large can generally be found only in outlying areas, which are too remote for students to walk to or reach by public transit, schools often require a vast expanse of asphalt for parking and queuing space. "Expansiveness is taken for granted" in most suburban and rural areas, say the CEFPI guidelines.⁵

One way school districts can better address these challenges is by being proactive about identifying sites. This can be accomplished through land banking. Land banking, in the context of school districts, is the practice of acquiring land before it is needed to build new schools, thereby adding certainty to the development process and allowing better integration of schools into neighborhoods. The primary ways school districts may do this is by including money in each bond measure to purchase land and replace land in a land bank, and through developer donations and set-asides.

State Legislation Related to Land Banking

The State of Texas does not have any policies or regulations for land banking for future school facilities. The only mention of land banking in Texas state legislation is related to the Urban Land Bank Demonstration Program, which allows certain municipalities to sell foreclosed property for the purposes of affordable housing development.⁶

LAND BANKING CASE STUDIES

Several school districts in the region include money in bond measures to purchase land. This section provides a review of two of those district's practices.

Denton ISD

Denton ISD set aside \$18 million for land acquisition in its 2013 bond package. Most elementary school sites are donated by developers. The district's process of selecting sites for future schools begins when the demographic consultant identifies areas of the district where

⁴ Oregon Transportation and Growth Management Program. (2005, June). Planning for schools and liveable communities: The Oregon school siting handbook. Retrieved from www.oregon.gov/lcd/tgm/docs/schoolsitinghandbook.pdf

⁵ The Council of Educational Facility Planners International. (1991). *Guide for Planning Educational Facilities*. P. F-13.

they may need future properties based on school capacity projections. For example, when an elementary school reaches 90 to 95 percent capacity, the ISD will begin to look for new sites to relieve that school. The district will begin to look for middle and high school sites when capacity is projected to reach 90 to 95 percent within the 10-year projection horizon. Due to concerns about timing and acquisition cost, the district may land bank a site even if it is not an ideal location, and then seek opportunities to swap the site with a local land owner. For example, the site of the district's eighth middle school was swapped to get a site farther off of FM 720.

Frisco ISD

Frisco ISD has arguably the largest and most transparent land banking program in the region; however, the district has had difficulty banking sites fast enough to accommodate the rapid growth in enrollment. From the 2006 Bond Program, the district was able to purchase 19 sites and additional land adjacent to two sites, and construct 19 schools. As part of the district's 2014 Bond Program, \$37 million was set aside for land acquisition, including the expected purchase of 10 sites—four elementary sites, three middle school sites, and three high school sites.⁷ Funding was also included in the bond package for the construction of 14 new schools.

According to district staff, Frisco ISD is constructing four to five new schools every year, and it takes two years to design and build a new school. Therefore, in order to accommodate the enrollment growth over the next three years, the district needs to have 12 sites banked. Looking back, district staff remarked that they wished they would have land banked more in the past because of land price increases. However, there had been pressure from the school board not to acquire too much land—the school district is “not in the real estate business.”

LAND BANKING BEST PRACTICES

The longer school districts wait to plan for school facilities, the more difficult it becomes to find a site of adequate size, and the more cost prohibitive it becomes to purchase land. The following best practice recommendations may help school districts be more proactive in identifying sites and making better school siting decisions.

School Districts

- Partner with the city to raise awareness about the importance of planning for schools in the future, and about standards for schools and school sites. This will allow the city to be better informed in future discussions with developers seeking to set aside or donate land for schools.

⁶ Texas Local Government Code, Title 12, Subtitle A, Chapter 397C. Urban Land Bank Program Act. 12 Tex. Loc. Gov. Code §§ A-379C-379E (2013).

⁷ Frisco Independent School District. (2015). 2014 bond program: Land. Retrieved from <http://www.friscoisd.org/about/2014-bond-program/land>

- Develop a school facilities plan that anticipates need for the next 10 to 15 years, and identifies areas where school facilities may be needed in the future. Districts should make sure that the planning process is well-informed by creative ideas and good information, including input from local governments and the community, not simply a review of stale school siting concepts. Periodic plan updates will ensure the plan remains responsive to changing conditions in the community.
- Work with municipalities and counties to discuss opportunities for land swaps. Land banked for a city may be more internal to a community and a better fit for a school, and if school land is banked on the outskirts of the city this might work well for fleet or maintenance facilities.

Local Governments

- Encourage or require residential developers or applicants for zoning requests to contact the school district as a criteria for application approval.
- Explore opportunities to partner through the Urban Land Bank Demonstration Program to look at locating elementary schools in, or in close proximity to land being banked for affordable housing developments.

As buildable land within communities becomes scarcer, school districts and cities and counties should work together more carefully through planning and creative siting strategies to address growing challenges to finding suitable land.

NEXT STEPS

These findings will be presented along with others at NCTCOG's annual meeting of local government and school district elected officials, and NCTCOG staff will pursue continuing education of these issues to regional stakeholders.

Subsequent memos prepared for Task 2 of the TIGER grant will further examine the creation of a regional land banking program, opportunities to coordinate demographic projections for future need for school facilities and housing, and available funding sources and partnerships related to school siting and land banking.


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