

## **How we got where we are now...**

Thornton Creek Elementary is currently facing a dilemma. This is only my second year as a TC parent and my first year being involved with Site Council. It is clear from the discussions I have had with staff and other parents that the nature of the current situation is not entirely new. As I try and discuss the current situation as I understand it I recognize I do not have the same appreciations and history as many (and likely most) of the TC parents and staff regarding past dilemmas. My intention is to try and lay out what appears to be how we got where we are now for people like me who may be new to the issues. I hope those that are already familiar with the situation will read what I have written and point out my errors and omissions so we can all have a more thorough understanding.

The issue of capacity certainly goes back further than this school year. Obviously the transition two years ago from a 2-up model where each grade has two classes to a 3-up model where grades have three classes marks a significant transition. I believe, however, that the current dilemma began in October with the initiation of the District's Intermediate Term Capacity Management (ITCM) planning process. It is this ongoing process that we are trying to address.

In early October I received an email from a TC parent informing me that the District's draft plan for capacity management proposed placing an additional portable at Thornton Creek in each of the next four years. The ITCM process called for community meetings between October 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. At the presentations representatives from the District explained their expectations for added enrollment over the mid-term future. At the North Seattle meeting I was informed second hand that a member or members of the District staff requested a paper be drafted expressing the position of the Thornton Creek parent group. Those requesting the paper asked that it be ready before the Seattle School Board meeting eight days later. A paper was drafted over the next week and discussed at the October Site Council meeting. The letter was voted on and received unanimous consent prior to being submitted.

The parent group paper is a nine page document that thoroughly explains the reasons for its conclusions. The paper can be broken down into two distinct positions: opposition to further expansion of the program at Thornton Creek, and if expansion is inevitable then accommodations must be made by the district. The first position is consistent with the longstanding position of staff and was also expressed by the staff to the district at the time. The second position explained the infrastructure, academic, and logistic challenges that would need to be mitigated due to further demands on the limited resources of TC. Principle John Miner has explained these challenges in the past and the paper is also consistent with his points.

The ITCM presentation that was given by the district prior to the parent group letter explained that in the Eckstein Middle School service area the capacity shortfall over the next four years is expected to be between 250 and 325 seats. This shortage would occur at Bryant, Olympic Hills, Olympic View, Rogers, and Wedgwood Elementary Schools. In order to alleviate this capacity problem the draft plan proposed the Thornton Creek portables as well as four new portables at Bryant next year and one each at Olympic View, Olympic Hills, and Rodgers in later years.

Soon after the ITCM community meetings, the District formed the Facilities and Capacity Management Planning Advisory Committee (FACMAC). The FACMAC was made up of unpaid volunteers representing various stakeholders including one parent from TC. The committee was charged with evaluating and giving input on the District's ongoing facilities planning citywide including the capacity options in the Eckstein service area. On November 29<sup>th</sup> the District held a community meeting at Eckstein to release its latest recommendations for capacity planning. In the interim the TC Site Council had agreed to form a "Future of Thornton Creek" committee to solicit information from the larger parent population on their view toward the program at TC and the problem of capacity. The possibility of

relocation or the inevitability of portables related to the ITCM process created concern and it was decided that a broader scope of input was needed.

At the November 29<sup>th</sup> meeting however, the District announced that after the recommendations of the FACMAC had been considered the new draft of proposal for the Eckstein service area had changed. It was recommended Wedgewood add one portable, Olympic View and View Ridge repurpose an existing room each to add classroom capacity and no mention of Bryant was made. For Thornton Creek rather than a new portable TC would go back to two kindergartens next year; however, the Geo-Zone would be modified.

The Geo-Zone is a geographic area that acts as a tie-breaker for selecting students wishing to attend a specific school. In the case of Option Schools like TC the first preference is given to siblings, the Geo-Zone acts as the next and finally a lottery is used to allocate remaining spots. The original Geo-Zone was restricted to an area in very close proximity to TC thus assuring that students from a broad geographic area would have a realistic chance at attending Thornton Creek. The parent group's position paper specifically stated that altering the Geo-Zone as a tool of capacity management should not be an option. The reasons for this objection are clearly expressed in the paper. While the proposed alteration of the Geo-Zone was disappointing the return to two kindergarten classes and the avoidance of an additional portable were consistent with the staff and the parent group's paper opposing further expansion of the TC program. Two weeks later however, everything once again became unsettled.

Assistant Superintendent of Operations Pegi McEvoy attended the December 13<sup>th</sup> Site Council meeting. During her appearance she broached the idea of TC becoming a K-8. I was not able to attend the December Site Council meeting; however, at the Site Council meeting on January 10<sup>th</sup> it was quite clear that Ms. McEvoy's appearance cast much doubt upon the notion of the recommendations of the ITCM in November being realistic. Additionally, a debate about the desirability of a K-8 Thornton Creek created much discussion. It quickly became clear that the "Future of Thornton Creek" would need to act quickly to gauge the broader community's interests. It also became clear by this point that TC's options are closely tied to the BEX IV levy scheduled for February 2013.

BEX stands for Building Excellence. In 2013 the Seattle School District will be bringing a levy for new schools and major remodels to the voters. District employees at the ITCM meetings made it clear to me that the capacity planning currently underway could not consider the effects of new money from a levy; nonetheless, it was also clear in my one-on-one conversations that the levy is considered crucial to any intermediate planning.

While the levy will not be presented for another twelve months the planning is already proceeding. Because the future of Thornton Creek is tied up both in the capacity debate and also in how the levy relates to that debate, the window for forming a position as a community is closing. The February Town Hall meeting was an effort to gain more input from the TC community. Additionally it provided an opportunity for parents and staff to discuss the array of options and also the reality of each. It is worth noting that on January 25<sup>th</sup> the School Board unanimously adopted a short-term capacity management plan that expanded the TC Geo-Zone to incorporate all of the Wedgewood and View Ridge attendance areas. If TC does return to two kindergartens next year there will be approximately 20 spaces available after siblings are assigned. Given past interest it seems likely all of these spots will go to Geo-Zone preference. As for portables, the District delayed any decision on portable placement until after the February 27 to March 9<sup>th</sup> open enrollment period.

Please feel free to contact me with questions or comments.

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