



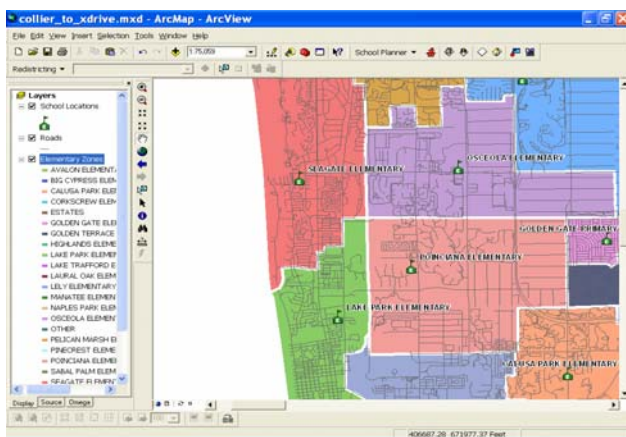
Facilities Planners at Collier County Public Schools in Florida Making Their Case For Best Practices With School Planner™ (featured in the November 2006 issue of School Planning & Management Magazine)

The role of school facilities planners would be far less challenging if they only had to identify demographic trends. In the burgeoning district of Collier County Schools in southwestern Florida, the responsibilities of Amy Taylor and Sandra Palm include negotiating new school construction with housing developers, persuading parents to accept redistricting proposals, and edifying school administrators and board members that the decision making process behind planning initiatives is of the highest quality. Each of these key areas requires that they demonstrate with clarity the analytical process used to identify trends. With just a staff of two, the planners are making a convincing case for what is in the best interests of the community with the support of School Planner™.



School Planner™ integrates student enrollment data with the ArcGIS computer-mapping environment. It provides projections based on several key variables impacting student enrollment such as kindergarten growth rate and residential construction, and utilizes both historical and current student data. The projections can be done at the attending level as well as the residing level. Created by The Omega Group, School Planner™ is a custom interface for ArcView GIS, a desktop software from ESRI. For Taylor and Palm, School Planner™ is a comprehensive analytical system that pulls various types of demographic data together into a unified presentation of results, based on a range of geographic layers from street level to neighborhood to the entire district.

The Collier County facilities planners have the responsibility of evaluating the impact of proposed housing development on the school district. The district's ability to negotiate construction of new school sites with the developer is crucial to this outcome. Typically, housing builders have a horizon that does not take into account the long-term factors for a specific community.



Consequently, it is not uncommon to find development proposals that minimize the need to include the construction of new schools within a housing project. However, simply pointing to general population trends is often not sufficient to persuade a developer that one or more additional school sites need to be added to the plan.

The leverage to negotiate alternatives comes from having all the details of enrollment and housing trends at your fingertips. As Taylor explains, "Prior to School Planner™, we were not effective negotiators since we were limited in the use of data. We can now use comparison analysis showing how previous housing developments have impacted enrollment and facilities and relate it to the proposed development. Just recently we were able to negotiate a new elementary and middle school with one housing developer." This one tool in School Planner™ alone precluded the potential for an overcrowding issue years ahead.

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The district's policy requires that the rezoning proposals undergo review by the district's cabinet of administrators and principals before public meetings with parents. This policy is aimed at

identifying any pitfalls with the study while at the same time edifying the district's frontline management that it could confidently respond to parents' concerns and inquiries. This point in the process could prove to be a bottleneck since every time one of the cabinet members requested a revision or wanted to see another comparison, it would usually take the team at least a week to come back with the results. Consequently, rezoning studies could take many months for the team to complete.

The implementation of School Planner™ streamlined the process. Now the answers to such questions or concerns could be provided instantaneously before the eyes of the administrators. Administrators were able to recognize that the rezoning proposal was a solution for the long term needs of the district and not just a minimalist approach to relieving the immediate overcrowding occurring at one or two of the schools. The advantage of having the same tool for analysis as well as presentation is immeasurable. The study could now be completed in a month's time and public presentations started.

The task of redistricting or rezoning attendance boundaries must be addressed at two levels. The first is revising the boundaries to optimize utilization of facilities. The second is to explain to parents impacted by this change why this rezone is necessary. The latter is often more difficult if parents cannot understand the analytical process behind the proposed rezone. According to Taylor, "Past parent meetings were a negative experience for everyone. We would present our data in the form of charts, tables, spreadsheets and conclude with hardcopy maps showing the newly zoned boundaries. The parents found the data too technical, complex and undecipherable, and we could never satisfy their concerns or questions because we always circling back through the data they considered impenetrable."

The ability to depict pictorially was key to successful parent meetings. In the most recent rezoning, referred to as Elementary "I", School Planner™ was used for the first time, and the situation was the opposite. Previously, parents challenged why one child was being moved over another or why one neighborhood was targeted over another. The difference with School Planner™, says Sandra Palm, is that "they could see what we were seeing. There was no mystery as to how we arrived at our results. The parents may not have necessarily been happy about the changes but at least they could understand the choices we made."

The process of rezoning in the School District of Collier County had been highly labor intensive until the implementation of School Planner™. The rezoning team usually consisted of 6 or 7 staff members. This team gathered data from various sources such as census data, real estate information, transportation routes, enrollment projections, and special programs. This year the team was reduced to two members, one long-term planner and an assistant facilities planner. Taylor candidly states, "This staff reduction would have occurred regardless of whether or not we had School Planner™. But thank goodness we had School Planner™!" School Planner™ has accelerated the momentum of the planning process. In fact, the district is now embarking on a school expansion involving six school sites over the next year.

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