

Notes from the meeting with Allen Lew, Executive Director, Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, 26 July 2007, RFK Stadium

Present: Allen Lew, Tony Robinson (OPEFM), Cathy Wiss (ANC 3F), Sue Hemberger, and Dan Carozza

1. There are still open questions about who makes what school modernization decisions and about whether control over capital projects will come with control over maintenance issues. The Mayor will determine the answer to the first question after discussing it together with Lew and Rhee. The Council is eager to weigh in on both issues as well.
2. There's only so much construction you can do a year and do it right. With the stadium (and, before that, the Convention Center), Lew has been routinely doing \$250-\$275 million a year. While he doesn't think that's the absolute maximum he could do, he would refuse to try to double that because quality would suffer. He's proud of having met a variety of social goals (first source hiring, use of LSDBEs, apprenticeship programs) while doing this volume and doesn't think there's anyone else in the area who has combined these objectives so successfully.
3. He's a stickler for getting things done right the first time (no partial solutions or temporary expedients) and then following up with regular maintenance. He wants to work with reliable contractors and, when he's in charge, contractors who wouldn't otherwise deal with DCPS will come on board. He's able to hire the best and get good work out of them because he makes sure people are paid promptly (he signs the checks himself) and because he makes decisions quickly so workers aren't kept hanging around doing nothing.
4. From his point of view, a public-private partnership involves shared investment and/or risk. If they aren't putting their own money in, they aren't partners. And he doesn't need or want subcontractors. Most firms don't have the capacity, track record, or experience to pull off many of the things they propose to do. "Show me where you've done this before" is his question.
5. At this point, Lew's first priority is to eliminate the backlog. School modernization should focus on quality of life issues. Bathrooms, air conditioning and heating, leaky roofs, code violations, unsafe conditions need to be fixed ASAP. And it doesn't make sense to do one school at a time. You make a contract to get everyone's bathrooms done, all the roofs repaired, etc.
6. He'd also like to see things done sooner rather than later. The Council debated a 10 year vs. 15 year budget; he'd love to see 7 years. But he hasn't fully assessed the scope of the work yet. Can't trust the work orders – he's done a series of site visits and heard back from contractors and all evidence is that the backlog of work orders is longer than previously reported and yet still grossly understates what needs to be done. The key is to talk to principals, teachers, kids, and parents.
7. He's a strong believer in public education and in equity. It's like EMS – someone calls in with a heart attack and someone calls in with a sore throat. You don't ask where they live – you deal with the heart attack first. He was dismissive of proposed Council legislation that would create 20 state of the art schools because it would likely mean that the other 120 schools would

continue to be neglected. If you could do both simultaneously, he would, but he doesn't want to see trophy projects trump basic needs.

8. There are real capacity issues, including swing space, that limit how much work can be done simultaneously. It's not simply (or even primarily) an issue of money at this point. It's oversight. Good planning is crucial – to do things well and efficiently, you need schedules that show every step, no matter how trivial. And you need a clear chain of command. He's a strong believer in fast-tracking and is working to change the culture of various city agencies (here the talk switched to Wilson pool as an example) to focus on efficiency, rationality, and foresight rather than “how we do things here.”
9. He's skeptical about whether there can/will/should be a new Master Facilities Plan ready by October 1st. It's crucial to sit down with communities and figure out what's wrong and what needs to be fixed. The needs of the end users (teachers and students) should drive the process rather than the interests of politicians and bureaucrats.
10. There is lots of jostling for position going on right now. Everyone wants their school to be at the front of the line. That's understandable after so many years of neglect. But it may be the wrong approach. Don't go school by school – go problem by problem. And start with the most urgent problems – the ones that affect the learning environment most.