

Riley, Kate

From: Andrew Todd Marcus [REDACTED]
Sent: Sunday, December 15, 2019 10:38 PM
To: Riley, Kate; City Manager
Subject: Comments regarding the proposed designs for Tobin Montessori and Vassal Lane Upper School Project

Dear Mr. DePasquale,

I am writing to you in regards to the proposed design options for the new TM/VLUS project. I am a licensed architect in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Chief Academic Officer of a local innovation school, a founding former board member of Montessori preschool and the parent of a Tobin first grade student.

I have read and heard many comments and concerns about the anticipated size of the new school and am well aware of the expanding needs for expanded quality programs within our community. That said, an extensive amount of research indicates that there may be many benefits from smaller learning communities and while I recognize that rethinking the entire structure of the district is not feasible, I strongly believe that we can offer many of the benefits of a smaller school environment through thoughtful design and architectural intervention.

To that effect, while I lean in my preference for Proposed Design 3: Pavilions, I have some general concerns and comments about the proposed designs and their potential as the process moves into a clearly defined schematic design and design development phase. I support the general locations of the three major programs, especially the more residential facing aspect of Tobin and the sheltered location of the Preschool. That said, I have some concern that the design driven by the FAR will dramatically change both the quality of the community and the benefits of the current design specific to a Montessori education.

I would ask that the City and the architects consider rethinking the preschool and Tobin portions of the design as follows:

1. Consider unifying the programs to better retain and enhance multi-age interaction that is a hallmark of Montessori pedagogy. This could be achieved by distributing preschool classrooms on the lower levels (see point 2), with lower and upper elementary classrooms on the 2nd and 3rd levels. The pavilion theme can extend to the interior through atriums to offer visual and circulatory communication across the school. This would offer the opportunity to have more integrated "common" use spaces that would more naturally connect to all Tobin Classrooms and be a natural extension of a more integrated age community. This also addresses another concern I have with this option which is the heavy centralization of the common spaces.
2. Consider dramatically rethinking the extent of direct outdoor access. The current building offers direct access to both private and shared outdoor space for virtually every class at Tobin. Beyond being vital for Montessori classes, there is ample evidence to suggest more and varied outdoor time is beneficial to children in countless ways. In some ways I would love to see a design option retaining the current building but renovating it so that the preschool remains in the East wing with ample attention paid to improving the outdoor spaces directly adjacent to the classrooms. I think the protected quality of an outdoor space for each classroom is amazing, as is the angled quality and variation of each room in the current location, and these would be great to preserve. There are qualities of Mont. education that are different than other types of education and they should be expressed on the site as well as in the building design. In any case, a new building could achieve this access in many ways, perhaps with a half story split (a level 1A, 1B) providing direct outdoor access to all preschool classrooms and exterior stair access to every classroom in the elementary school. As mentioned above, thoughtful use of external pavilions, internal pavilions, and atrium spaces could connect all parts of the school to the outside and provide for a fully integrated community that matches the close-knit qualities at Tobin now, regardless of the expanded size. We

also have the opportunity to rethink the culture of the VLUS (and middle schools in general) through a thoughtful integration with Tobin.

Given the thoughts related above I would also like to take this opportunity to raise two points regarding the temporary relocation to the Broadway location. Before doing so, I applaud the City for undergoing some level of redesign and construction of the Broadway space to accommodate both the culture and curriculum of Tobin Montessori. That said, my two points are as follows:

1. The current outdoor play space at the Broadway location is truly deficient, both in the quality of outside play and access from the classrooms. I encourage the City to consider using at least part of the expansive central courtyard to introduce a modern and age appropriate play area. Even without a complete playground renovation, play areas that are challenging both physically and mentally, especially within the context of a Montessori education, are vital and should not be overlooked. Our children should not have substandard access to outdoor play during a vitally formative period of their development. Our City has both the resources and creativity to offer a better solution. The new playground at Amigos is proof of this.
2. I would like to encourage the City to find a reasonable and sane solution to the issue of staff and faculty parking during the construction period. It has taken many years to attract and retain the excellent faculty and staff at Tobin and VLUS. I understand the challenges of urban school districts and fully support the push to promote public transit and a city less dependent on automobiles, but this is a goal that requires a gradual shift and broader support. Many of the faculty and staff at Tobin/VLUS commute from some distance and work, in part, in North Cambridge because they are able to easily travel there. Please consider offering parking, subsidized parking, or temporary resident stickers to the faculty and staff during the construction period so that we can be sure to retain the qualified and committed professional community who support our children.

Please pass on my comments as appropriate and thank you and all of the city employees for working to provide excellent education to our children.

Best regards,
Andrew Todd Marcus, Register Architect MA#50005