

## Mixing Generations: New High School Enriches Senior/Student Life

By Philip J. Poinelli

*The lessons learned - and the intergenerational learning opportunities sparked by co-locating a high school and a senior center in Swampscott, Massachusetts are generating inquiries from other communities seeking to achieve a greater communitywide use and acceptance of new schools. The author reflects on how an intergenerational school model works and explains how stakeholders are reacting to this innovative concept. The article also explores how community benefits emerge from a multi-generation, shared space model.*

With just three square miles of land, Swampscott, Massachusetts, faces a daunting problem each time a new school or public facility is proposed. This picturesque but densely-populated seaside community contains little open space. Located 15 miles north of Boston, Swampscott had not opened a new school since 1958. Municipal facilities, for better or worse, stayed in place long beyond any normal life cycle.

So when planning began for the long-awaited new high school, town officials and the High School Building Committee saw a window of opportunity to creatively address the needs of a second age group: the town's seniors.

Run by the Council on Aging, the town's undersized Senior Center operated out of a converted 3-story house built around 1920. Rooms were small and cramped, a lack of handicap access limited most activities to the lower level, and on-street parking for seniors and staff was scarce.

The town had tried for years to find a new home for the Senior Center, and in the School

Committee's 2001 System Wide Master Plan, a 3,000 sf senior citizen room within a new high school was proposed as an adjunct to the existing center.

According to High School Building Committee Chair Joe Markarian, "The idea evolved over time, as we looked at the potential for additional state funding and at the practical issue of how to best utilize the new school facility." The Building Committee decided to take a fresh look at the issue, and to work with the Council on Aging and others to review options for meeting the needs of both age groups within the new high school.

"What surprises people is that, in a community such as ours, the number of senior households is equal to the number of school-age households," Markarian observed. Providing senior services in a new civic facility is "a sound, logical thing to do for the community."

The result of careful planning and consensus-building, the new 200,000 square foot Swampscott High School integrates a 7,500 square foot, daylight-filled Senior Center on its ground floor. Both the



Senior Center and the high school opened in September of 2007, built on a portion of a town park.

The lessons learned - and the intergenerational learning opportunities sparked by this innovative co-location - are generating inquiries from other communities seeking to



achieve a greater communitywide use and acceptance of new schools. Most of their questions center on the planning and execution of an inter-generational school model, and the degree to which co-location is actually performing relative to the expectations of stakeholders: school officials, the Council on Aging, seniors, and the Swampscott community.

### Key Planning Considerations

After receiving approval from the town meeting to design a new high school, the volunteer Swampscott High School Building Committee and design firm Symmes Maini and McKee Associates (SMMA) began an in-depth review of the logistical, financial, and social considerations of co-location. They examined four key questions:

- 1) What advantages could be created by relocating the Senior Center to the High School?
- 2) What potential disadvantages could be experienced by seniors, students, or the town?
- 3) How would integrating the senior center affect the design and the cost of the new school?
- 4) Could the Center be set up as a separate fiscal entity, paying its own utilities and overhead?

The planning also required consensus-building among all stakeholders. "There was some disagreement initially on it," recalled Markarian. "School administrators

wondered how a shared facility would impact their responsibilities, and the Council on Aging wondered how their daily program would be affected," he said.

An initial apprehension of Council on Aging members was the notion of mixing elders with high school students. Would there be a risk of physical harm when fast-moving teenagers encountered the slower paced seniors in the hallways, sidewalks and parking lots of the new high school?

Review of the costs and integration issues revealed that the potential benefits of relocating the Senior Center outweighed any downside risk. Central to the co-location argument: funding and building a new stand-alone Senior Center, and equipping it to modern standards, would not be feasible from an available land and available budget assessment. While the cost of the new school might be higher to include the Senior Center, the opportunity for a lasting return on investment for the town would be significant.

### Consensus-Building on Identity, Shared Spaces

As discussion on co-location proceeded, SMMA identified the significant opportunities for seniors, including amenities not affordable in a stand-alone senior center facility. The process of interviewing Council on Aging Board Members, SMMA realized how many Senior Center program requirements were already provided in the new high school program. Envisioning the

off-peak use by seniors of these amenities, the co-location discussion gradually shifted from questions of "why" to resolutions around "how."

Planned for the new school, shared amenities available when not in use by students included:

- Gymnasium with indoor track
- Weight training and fitness center
- Music suite with a chorus room and piano lab
- Computer room with Internet Access
- Exercise, dance and aerobic studio
- Arts and crafts studios with photography lab and kiln for ceramics program
- Lecture halls and performance spaces

With easy access to shared high school spaces, the dedicated space for the Senior Center would be kept relatively small. Through cooperative scheduling, seniors could access the program and recreational spaces throughout the school, especially before and after peak school hours and during school vacations.

Additional support was gained by establishing a separate identity and access for the Senior Center in the design of the new school. Entrance to the Senior Center would be at the opposite end of the school from the classrooms. A dedicated front door and signage provided additional autonomy and safety benefits to the Council.

### Dollars and Sense

The funding of the total Swampscott High project, \$56 million, had to be approved by a 2/3 majority vote at town meeting and a simple majority vote of the local voters by way of a ballot question. Though senior citizens historically supported new schools, incorporating a new facility for them rallied seniors and the general voting population to approve the project. The new facility was considered as a

welcome resource for the entire town, not just for families with school age children.

Co-location provided advantages related to operation costs and budgeting. Shared, central mechanical, electrical and other engineering systems significantly reduced the cost of building separate and dedicated systems. The solution for tracking and billing utility costs came from establishing separate zones, allowing for isolation of utility costs. For natural gas use, which could not be separately metered, a formula based on square feet was established.

### Performance Outcomes and Benefits

Nine months after opening, the Center has exceeded expectations in a number of key outcomes. According to Senior Center Executive Director Marilyn Hurwitz, utilization of the new facility has quadrupled. "In our old place, we served about 75 seniors a week," she said. "Here, we are seeing 75 in a day. In the prior building, we could fit only 12 for meals. Today, we can serve 90 in one sitting."

The new Senior Center includes a living room with gas fireplace and comfortable furniture, sub-dividable dining space, a small commercial kitchen (most meals are pre-prepared by Meals on Wheels), three flexible activity rooms/classrooms, a multi purpose health clinic, and administrative spaces. Community space is designed to take full advantage of natural light, an important improvement that helps energize

and motivate the service program inside.

An unexpected boon is the social connection created for both students and seniors. "Too many seniors are generationally isolated," said Hurwitz. "In a setting like this one, we can find countless ways to involve the kids within the seniors' activities." She cites the popular tutorials teens are providing on computer skills, e-mail, programming cell phones, and using digital cameras and VCR equipment.

In January, 25 fifth graders adopted pen pals among the town's seniors. On June 11th, the Center hosted its first annual 'Meet Your Pen Pal' lunch. During Veterans Day remembrances, a panel discussion featuring WWII and Korean War veterans was held in conjunction with social study classes.

### Conclusions and Lessons Learned

Among the lessons learned in mixing generations in the Swampscott High School project:

- The rising cost of land acquisition and construction for free-standing municipal facilities creates an opportunity for cre-

ative integration into new, multipurpose school buildings

- Facilities opportunities afforded by a new high school are far greater than would be possible in any free-standing project
- Approval and funding processes bring varying constituencies together behind a common cause
- A high school setting offers an added social value for all stakeholders. Students benefit from interaction with seniors, and seniors learn from students

Hurwitz described how one senior, who recently lost her spouse, finds comfort in simply coming to the Center and being around the sounds and bustle of a busy school. "Much of what we are experiencing is in the fledging stage," she said. "But I can tell you that the value we can provide in this setting is tremendous."

Markarian agrees. "It's a gradual process. But things are progressing very well," he said. "Both the school administrators and the Council are showing tremendous openness to the possibilities." ■



### Author Bio

Philip J. Poinelli AIA is an architect and Principal of Symmes Maini & McKee Associates in Cambridge MA where he specializes in K-12 Master Planning and Educational Programming. A member of CEFPI since 2005, he serves as Principal-In-Charge for many of SMMA's school projects.