

Report of the University Council Committee on Facilities 2007-2008

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This report is divided into three sections. The first section addresses each of the five specific charges given to the committee at the beginning of the academic year. The second section lists issues that should be given high priority for the committee's work in 2008-2009. The third section contains some comments about the operation of the committee and some suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the committee.

Section I: Specific Charges to the 2007-2008 Committee:

1. Continue to receive information updates on the South Street Bridge project.

The South Street Bridge was among the charges to the 2006-2007 Committee on Facilities. Little reliable information was available to them and there has been little reliable information available to the 2007-2008 committee during most of this year. The replacement of the bridge is being managed by the Streets Department of the City of Philadelphia. The University of Pennsylvania, to a large extent, is only a very interested - and very concerned - bystander.

It now appears that the bridge will be closed at the end of the summer. The replacement bridge is expected to be opened near the end of the 2009-2010 Academic Year. Although the City has anticipated some of the changes in traffic patterns that will occur, it is not possible to anticipate the full range of the responses that commuters will make. The South Street exit of the Schuylkill Expressway will be closed during the entire period of construction, and the many commuters who now use this exit will find alternate routes.

The burden of the bridge closure will fall very unevenly on the constituents of the Penn community. Students, many of whom live on campus or within easy access to public transportation, will be affected least. Those faculty members who can arrange flexible commuting hours will be able to avoid the worst traffic delays. Staff members, most of whom lack any flexibility, will suffer most.

The traffic on the streets near the campus is already very congested at rush hours. It is probable that these streets will become much more congested immediately after the bridge is closed and then improve somewhat as commuters make adjustments. Inasmuch as new facilities are being constructed on 34th Street, and construction will probably begin along Chestnut Street and Walnut Street before the new bridge is opened, traffic will probably get even worse before the bridge is reopened. Motorists who switch from driving to public transportation will obviously reduce the traffic problems in the area. The University should try to find ways to stimulate such switches.

One of the most important actions the University can take in the periods immediately before and immediately after the closure of the bridge is to provide regular and accurate information to the entire University community. The community will be best served if this information is neither unduly alarmist nor unrealistically optimistic.

2. Monitor the University's progress in achieving sustainability.

Since the beginning of the year the University has set up an Environmental Sustainability Advisory Committee with over thirty members and with six specialized subcommittees. This committee is moving ahead, with the expectation that a formal report will be submitted in the fall of 2009. It seems unreasonable for the Facilities Committee to monitor this committee and report its progress to University Council. The Sustainability Committee itself should provide progress reports directly to University Council in the fall of 2008 and in the spring of 2009.

3. Receive updates on the Penn Connects projects.

The committee has focused its attention on the space acquired from the Post Office and on the space adjacent to that acquisition. The latter is currently used for playing and practice fields for intramural and intercollegiate athletics. The space is remote, its access is difficult, and it is generally uninviting except to users of the athletic fields.

The configuration suggested by the Penn Connects proposals will solve the access problem by covering part of the SEPTA commuter rail line and by providing a pedestrian bridge (the “Weave” bridge) over the AMTRAK line to the River Fields. The amount of open space on campus will be significantly increased - at least temporarily - and new playing fields will provide needed space to athletic teams. We see little in the projections, however, that would make the site significantly more inviting for use by anyone other than members of athletic teams. Without some other attraction beyond the park planned we fear that most members of the University community will continue to believe that the Palestra marks the eastern edge of the Penn campus. If the campus is truly to be extended to the river – or as near to the river as the Expressway permits – some way must be found to make part of this space a destination for those members of the University community who do not use the fields for organized sports.

It is our impression that there is an acute shortage of space on the rest of the campus. Student groups are short of meeting rooms and performance spaces. Requests to the University for specific space that might be potentially available are regularly sent to the end of a long queue of earlier requests from other applicants. Providing such space in one or more of the planned buildings closest to the informal parts of Penn Park (the South Street Bridge Building and Walnut Street Phases 1 and 2) could relieve the pressure for space elsewhere on campus and at the same time provide a destination which would draw people to the new eastern precinct. We recommend that a separate committee, with representation from all potential users, be set up to consider how this might be accomplished.

The development of Penn Park will provide for more practice and playing fields for students engaged in organized athletics. It is important that it also provide space for students whose athletic activity is casual and less organized. The field behind Hill House is now used extensively by students whose focus is on recreation rather than competition. The student housing units to be constructed along Chestnut Street will both limit activity on this field and increase the number of potential users.

4. Receive updates on deferred maintenance issues and management of maintenance projects.

The term "Facilities Renewal" is both more accurate and less pejorative than "Deferred Maintenance." We will use that term in this report. While the committee did not look at the management of facilities renewal, it appears that the process is quite well organized. It appears that there are serious funding problems which are, unfortunately, neither surprising nor easily solved. We share, along with most other private universities, a mismatch between our ability to raise money to construct new buildings and the ability to identify funds to maintain them. While prospective donors can be lured with the prospect of seeing their names on a new building, a replacement air-handling system is a much harder sell. In addition, the Responsibility Center Management system, which Penn pioneered almost three decades ago, has given the individual schools much greater control of their resources and provided incentives to manage those resources effectively. However, with so much control in the schools it is difficult to achieve anything approaching uniformly excellent standards of facilities renewal across the University.

We understand that a task force has been commissioned to explore alternate mechanisms for funding facilities renewal. We hope this group will be able to find a way to make it easier to achieve appropriate University-wide standards.

5. Help to promote and possibly expand Penn Transport Services.

We met with Ronald C. Ward, Manager of Penn Transit Service, and with John Gustafson, his Assistant Manager. It seems clear, from both Mr. Ward's comments and from observations by members of the committee who use the service, that it provides a very valuable service to a large number of people. It enhances safety on the campus and environs and provides convenient transport throughout campus and to areas of student housing. The improvements that are underway will provide potential riders with much better information about arrivals of the transit vehicles.

It also appears that in many ways the service is operating at the very limits of its current capacity. In the absence of additional resources it would seem irresponsible for the committee to promote either additional use or an expansion of the service. Indeed, the additional traffic produced by the closure of the South Street Bridge will challenge the Transit Service to maintain its current level of service.

We understand that part of funding for the service comes from providing service for other University programs. This entrepreneurial activity should be commended, since it both provides income for the Transport service and provides significant savings and better service to the programs that use it. We also understand that part of the funding for the service depends on income from parking revenues. There is no obvious logic to this arrangement, and the construction of new buildings on parking lots makes future income from parking uncertain. While we have not studied the service's funding in detail, we recommend that attention be given to providing a more rational and stable source of funds. It might be useful to look at how other universities fund comparable systems.

Section II: Issues for the 2008-2009 Facilities Committee

1. South Street Bridge: It is probable that the 2008-2009 academic year will be known as the "Year of the Bridge." The closing of the South Street Bridge will make commuting difficult and cause congestion on many of the streets near campus. In addition to the problems that have been anticipated, others will surely arise. The

committee should try to assess the problems the closure creates, advise University Council, and suggest possible solutions. If our understanding of the schedule for the closing is correct this should be the first item on the committee's agenda in September.

2. Building Plans for the East Campus - The construction of the buildings contemplated for the land acquired from the Postal Service is a number of years in the future.

However, it is not too early for potential users to make their needs known. A subcommittee, with representation from all potential stakeholders, should be established to look carefully at potential plans.

3. Green Space on Campus – The Penn Connects projects will increase the amount of green space on campus, at least in the short run. In the longer run the buildings proposed for the Penn Park site may trim or eliminate that increase. Moreover, the projected increase in green space appears to focus on organized athletics. The committee should make a survey of the number and uses of the green spaces on campus, with the goal of providing a benchmark to which future plans could be compared.

4. Pedestrian Safety - It appears that many members of the University Community who navigate the campus on foot are regularly menaced by automobiles and bicycles.

Moreover, the frequent closing of sidewalks for the convenience of construction and maintenance projects makes the safety of pedestrians even more precarious. The committee should make a careful survey of the problems that exist and suggest possible solutions.

5. Facility Renewal - It is not obvious that simply receiving reports is helpful. It may be useful for the committee to learn more about the status of the University's facilities and then try to better understand how decisions on facilities renewal are made.

6. Transit Service – It may be helpful for the committee to survey other universities to see how their transit systems are operated and how they are funding. The committee should also monitor the effect of the South Street Bridge closure on the service.

Section III: Organization of Committee

The operation of the committee this year has not been effective - at least in part because the chair had not previously been on the committee. The attendance was not very good, a problem reported to have existed in previous years. The charges to "receive reports" put the committee in a very passive - and basically uninteresting - mode.

Suggested changes:

1. The time of the meetings should be set before committee members are appointed. Those who cannot reserve that time should not be appointed.
2. The charges should be framed as "Investigate" or "Explore" rather than "Receive reports"
3. Some of the initial work of the committee should be assigned to subcommittees that would have the flexibility to look at issues in detail before reporting to the parent committee.