

Agenda Item Number 17.

Strengthening/Supporting Educational Institutions, Programs and Services Discussion

Presenter: Jamon Kent

Action Recommended: Board Direction

Issue Summary: At the Board's July 24th Goal Setting Session, attention was given to the priority goal of strengthening and supporting educational institutions, programs and services. At the December meeting the Board received the "Possible 'Disappropriation Costs' to Education and Human Services" report and held a discussion on strengthening and supporting education institutions.

At the direction of the Board, LCOG staff edited the "Disappropriation" report, put it on the LCOG web site and electronically delivered it to members of the Board and other Lane County agencies. As the Board hoped this report was the subject of at least one newspaper article and the subject of at least one talk show since the December meeting.

The Board is now scheduled to continue its discussion on the goal of strengthening and supporting educational institutions programs and services. At the conclusion of the December discussion it was suggested that the Board form a task force to develop strategies to meet this Board Goal. This suggestion was not acted upon and could be a possible outcome of this months considerations.

Background: (Excerpts from the December Board Material, Agenda Item Number 15, “Follow-up to Goal Setting Session Supporting Educational Institutions and Services”)

The Board’s July 24th Goal Setting Session resulted in three broad suggestions for LCOG’s work on this goal:

1. Recognizing that much of the policy control over educational services has shifted to State government, orchestrate a coordinated, clear advocacy message to the Legislature that reflects the interests of the region and emphasizes issues of quality of life and economic well being. Seek financial support.
2. Organize and support a cooperative program involving citizens and the districts of Lane County to find new efficiencies and ways to “re-invent education” that can be provided in a more cost-effective manner.
3. Look at land use patterns, growth projections, long-range growth management strategies and the structure of educational boundaries.

The Board is asked to consider each of these (as well as any additional suggested actions) and provide direction with respect to LCOG’s work in these areas.

It is clear from the Board’s previous discussion of education, at both the K-12 and community college levels, that an efficiently delivered, high quality product is considered a paramount public service. This is an issue with heavy value implications for both the public and government officials. The linkages between education and economic vitality (the Board’s other high priority objective) are clear—but tend to get lost in the short-term struggles over funding and control. The region has a major interest in supporting and enhancing educational service delivery. However, the public policy decisions of the past decade—notably driven by the citizen initiative process—have largely taken the control of local/regional educational services out of the hands of the local/regional citizens being served.

For decades, LCOG has assisted its members, including school districts, to find cost-effective means of conducting their business. Primarily, this has been accomplished by educational units seeking and receiving specialized services from the COG. However, if the goal is to find operating efficiencies, I am not sure that the COG staff is particularly well positioned or equipped to contribute.

The fact that this county is served by sixteen separate school districts (the majority of which are losing enrollment), as well as an educational service district and a

community college, certainly makes the question of the mix of service delivery mechanisms relevant. A community-wide or regional view might include attention to land utilization and development constraints, population shifts, long-term growth management strategies, and economies of scale. It could be argued that some existing school districts will not be able to accomplish their missions in the long run, and their clients/students will in the future be served by larger consolidated districts with fewer school buildings. But such an argument—projection of the future—is political dynamite. Schools are far more than just education factories in many communities. Their role as societal cement can not be overestimated. And those districts that are perhaps least viable (particularly those not associated with any city) are those whose patrons would most vigorously oppose proposals for dissolution, consolidation or school closures.

During this continued discussion the Board is encouraged to look critically at the possibilities (consider strengths weaknesses, opportunities and threats) associated with the prospective actions and to provide direction to the staff.