

## St. Paul schools honored for engaging public in building plans

Anthony Lonetree, October 6, 2016

When the St. Paul school district rolled out a five-year plan earlier this year to renovate and add on to schools, much of the attention centered on its \$484 million price tag.

Tax implications were reported, and individual projects highlighted, but lost in the shuffle was a nod to the massive amount of work that went into the effort, in particular, the role that school communities played in creating facility improvement plans totalling more than 550 pages.

For its work to engage the public in the process, the district was honored at a conference last week in Montreal, Canada, with a "core values award" from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) USA, a nonprofit group that promotes and recognizes public engagement campaigns.

Asked in its application to specify the "innovative participation techniques" it used, the district stated flatly that the plan's most creative feature was the fact it involved stakeholders at all.

"Industry wide, facility planning is nearly always viewed as the sole realm of technical experts because involving anyone else is presumed to be too time consuming, expensive, of minimal value, and even potentially harmful because lay people have no idea how facilities planning 'really' works," the district wrote.

Officials believed it was important that the people who knew their schools best -- students, teachers, staff, families and community members -- should have a say in determining what sort of improvements reflected the priorities and programming at each of the 68 school facilities, the district said.

To encourage participation, workshops were held on Saturday mornings, with meals, child care, transportation and interpreters provided by the district.

The facilities master plan took nearly two years to complete, and is expected to be tweaked annually.

This week, Tom Parent, the district's facilities director, presented an update to the board on eight projects set for the coming year. They include additions to Adams Spanish Immersion and St. Anthony Park and Highland Park elementary schools, and a new entrance at Humboldt High.