

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Montgomery County has unneeded school sites: says who??**

by Mark R. Adelman  
Chair, MCCF Education Committee

Does the Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) system have unneeded properties? That is NOT a trick question, and it does not require a rocket scientist to answer. [Hint: NO!!] It's a question that is easy to answer if you are thinking big picture, but, if the question is hidden by posing it in a small box, it is easy to make the question appear tricky. Let me clarify: this issue has emerged, not as one about education but about political priorities. Politics and public education do not mix well; that's why MCPS and its Board of Education (BoE) are - and should remain - distinct from the County Government. But that is not the way the County Executive and the County Council (CE/CC) see it.

The CE/CC are on a mission to increase the supply of affordable housing in Montgomery County. Last fall Mr. Duncan asked Superintendent Weast and the BoE to declare three MCPS properties surplus and authorize their transfer to the County. The three are the so-called Edson Lane, Brickyard Road, and Kendale Road parcels, all in the Potomac and North Bethesda areas.

Dr. Weast and the BoE initially indicated willingness to surplus the sites but, after a firestorm from outraged citizens, proposed to study the issue and determine how best to use the sites. If they were not needed and, if surplus, what "revenue" would they generate for MCPS. In this context, "revenue" might mean actual money or "just" goodwill. After all, MCPS gets more than one billion dollars per year from the County.

Now, Dr. Weast, after studying the matter, has proposed that the Edson Lane "parcel is surplus to the needs of MCPS ... and, with the approval of the state superintendent of schools, it may be conveyed to the Montgomery County Government for disposition." This proposal is part of the CIP upon which the BoE will soon vote. The other parcels are still under study, but they will surely be up for consideration very soon. Dr. Weast may just be playing the political game, making the pre-determined decisions in small steps, so as to obscure the bigger issues and diffuse citizen concerns by dividing our focus. But he may also be attempting to slow the process and give us all bite-size morsels to digest and think about.

Why the Edson Lane parcel first? I got the MCPS maps on the parcel and drove over to see it. It is a small (1.75 acres), undeveloped wooded lot between two small townhouse clusters, adjacent to several large playing fields of the Tilden MS. Unused? Yes. Unneeded? Well that depends on the context. It could be the site for a small building, say for arts/crafts or storage. Or it could be used to extend the playing fields. Or, if affordable housing for teachers and support staff is the goal, why not use the site as the basis for a school-based version of Habitat for Humanity? Let students construct affordable housing that is then rented to qualifying teachers/support staff. Or what about just leaving the parcel the way it is as a small buffer from the nearby frenzied traffic and hustle/bustle. I just don't believe that the issue has been discussed enough. And I share the opinion of many people that, given the current state of overcrowding of our schools and the repeated inability of MCPS to project accurately enrollment changes, it

makes NO sense to get rid of ANY MCPS property that might be used for ANY education-related purpose.

Now what about the bigger picture? Are these three sites the only ones that might be surplus? Many of our schools are constructed on sites made up of multiple parcels. Many of the small parcels do not contain a building, but the land is either functioning as a playing field or a green space buffer zone. Why not use all such parcels for affordable housing? How serious are the CE/CC about expanding the pool of affordable housing in our county? Many who have studied the issue argue that such housing has become increasingly scarce in part because our elected officials have been more concerned about pleasing developers, than about using existing regulations to force the development of lower cost housing. By my calculations, if the Edson Lane parcel were used to build townhouses at maximum allowable density a maximum of five MPDUs MIGHT result. Many would doubt that even five would be produced. Is that enough to justify giving anyway an MCPS parcel that can NEVER be recovered?

Several have pointed out that the BoE is just that, NOT the Board of Housing. If MCPS policies and resources are to be used in the cause of helping teachers and support staff find affordable housing in Montgomery County, why not arrange to do this in a way that assures MCPS derives educational benefits for our children and MCPS retains long-term control of the "unneeded" parcels. If Dr. Weast and the BoE are concerned that MCPS budgets will be cut unless they give in to pressure to surplus selected school parcels, let's stiffen their resolve to do the best they can for our kids by reminding them that the CE/CC also work for us and we will demand that future County budgets continue to adequately fund our schools. Alternatively, any actions taken by the BoE that appear to put Executive-driven initiatives above the needs of our children, can only lead us to be less likely to support the massive use of county tax dollars for MCPS.

Does MCPS have unneeded school sites? Absent any real dialogue on this issue, the answer still appears to be NO! If there is an argument to be made otherwise, PROVE IT.