

"Federation Corner" column
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MCPS school planning flawed

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There has been lack of transparency in how the Board of Education makes decisions and does demographic analysis. Some of these problems have been highlighted in Sentinel articles (e.g. last week's article regarding Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) plan to surplus so called "unneeded" school sites, and the May 13 article "Politics and Schools Mix Again, and We All Lose").

Let us use the recent MCPS plans to close and surplus Seven Locks Elementary School as an example. In 2001 and 2002 the MCPS and the Board of Education recommended the expansion and modernization of Seven Locks. In 2003 the MCPS and Board again recommended the expansion and modernization of Seven Locks and explicitly recommended it in the November 2003 Capital Improvements Program (CIP). Then in early 2004 the Board of Education repudiated the planning done by the MCPS and the previous Boards of Education, and recommended Seven Locks not be expanded but instead be discarded.

Since there has been no substantive change in the MCPS land, schools, or students in Churchill cluster in the last year, that suggests either the plans of the MCPS and their CIPs are not to be trusted, or the CIP reversal is due to political pressure from the County Executive Doug Duncan and County Council to use school property for real estate developers and not for students (see last week's article).

Leaders and members of civic associations and PTAs representing well over 5,000 homes have asked questions about the planning process and the sudden change regarding Seven Locks, but information provided has frequently been misleading. When the community sent a detailed set of 15 questions regarding the basis of the MCPS planning, the MCPS Director of Planning, Mr. Joe Lavorgna, wrote that MCPS would not answer the questions of the community representatives or the PTA. Those questions dealing with total costs and alternatives are still unanswered after four months, and MCPS bureaucracy seems set on keeping community in the dark and moving ahead anyway. At the Board of Education public hearings on the CIP on November 10, 2004 over 100 people, mostly wearing "Save Seven Locks" tee-shirts, stood as a group to oppose the action of the MCPS and support the 10 community speakers criticizing MCPS's planning (that testimony is available, and will be posted at <http://www.save7locksschool.org>)

The State of Maryland has questioned the plans of MCPS. The State's initial review of the MCPS cost data and plans in October indicated that Seven Locks is a suitable school at its current site and should not be replaced, and the MCPS plans to build a replacement school were ill advised. Our understanding is that when MCPS was told of the state conclusion, they said they would go back and change the numbers. Therefore we can only assume the numbers the MCPS staff gave the Board of Education earlier in 2004 were wrong, or the numbers and assumptions are being manipulated to justify a political deal.

If the Board of Education was willing to be open to community input, there may be a better solution. Specific ideas have been developed by the community, but to date MCPS does not appear to want to seriously consider community input. Making mistakes, and not allowing community involvement in fundamental options affecting the alternatives seems like bad planning. Pursuing a plan to build a 750-student core elementary school on narrow winding flood prone Kendale Road (rather than expanding current Seven Locks school) that does not fully consider environmental or traffic costs could stick Montgomery County taxpayers with a big bill for poor MCPS planning. MCPS gave a sole source contract for over \$800,000 for a paper study of Kendale, after already having paid for a design expansion at Seven Locks. The community has suggested alternative approaches that are likely to be less expensive to taxpayers, but to date MCPS has forged ahead with a high cost plan with almost no community support.

Given the current state of overcrowding of our schools, with over 10,000 children in trailers, and the repeated inability of MCPS to project accurately enrollment changes, it does not make sense to surplus any MCPS property, which is the MCPS's plan.

It does make sense to let lucid community input be incorporated. In the case of Seven Locks the MCPS has discarded public input and wants to discard a good school. That is bad planning. With MCPS getting half of Montgomery County citizen taxes, it makes you wonder if MCPS poor planning results in wasting lots of your money. No wonder MCPS wants to keep citizens and taxpayers in the dark about the costs and politics of school construction.