

"Federation Corner" column
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School capacity numbers don't add up

better solutions are needed

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The Montgomery County Public Schools system (MCPS) recently released a chart showing the student capacity for each high school in the county, and for the elementary and middle schools in each cluster. The MCPS figures include projected capacity from all expansion projects in the school construction budget for the next five years. Of course, it remains to be seen whether there will actually be money for these planned school additions without again increasing our property taxes.

Still, assuming that all planned expansions will occur, the capacity numbers aren't good.

MCPS Projections

MCPS projects that, in September 2009, twelve of our twenty-four county high schools will have more students than they can accommodate. And, they predict that elementary schools in ten clusters and middle schools in three clusters will be beyond capacity. The MCPS chart is available online on the [Neighbors for a Better Montgomery website](http://www.neighborspac.org) -- www.neighborspac.org - at the following URL:
http://www.neighborspac.org/schools_capacity_test_fy05.htm .

You might think that this would stop new homes from being built in these areas, new homes that would throw more students into schools already predicted to be beyond capacity in five years. You might think so especially since Montgomery County has a law stating that new home building cannot be approved in an area unless the schools in that area are deemed adequate to accommodate the school age kids from the planned new homes. Not so. In the growth policy the Council approved last fall, they continued their long standing tradition of using a different definition of student capacity than that used by MCPS--the experts hired for their knowledge of school planning. The Council's new policy formula is based on a fixed number of students per classroom, regardless of the size of a classroom, the optimum number of students a teacher can handle, or the County policy of having smaller class sizes for the lower grades. The Council numbers, therefore, show the capacity for each school to be well above the number of students MCPS uses.

You're probably thinking, "Still, new home building will be stopped when a school reaches the growth policy's higher capacity number...right?" Wrong. The Council also decided last fall that elementary and middle schools will still be considered "adequate" if their enrollment is under 105% of the higher growth policy capacity figures. And, if a high school exceeds the higher policy number, the solution is that capacity will be borrowed on paper from an adjacent high school that has remaining capacity. Will students from the overcrowded high school be sent to the neighboring school? No, it's just a numbers game played on paper to allow new home building to continue.

New Growth Policy

Now you might ask, "What happens if an elementary or middle school exceeds 105% of the new growth policy's higher capacity figure? Or, what if a high school exceeds

capacity and cannot borrow from a neighboring school? Will this stop the building of new homes in the area around that school?" No. The games shifts again so that a developer can simply pay a fee and still get approval to build new homes in the area. Only when a school reaches 110% of the new, higher growth policy number approved by the County Council can the building of new homes in an area be stopped.

As bad as this current situation is, believe it or not it is an improvement over the previous Annual Growth Policy rules. Before, the AGP also allowed elementary and middle schools to borrow capacity from schools feeding into adjacent area high schools. Also, the Council passed an impact tax to pay for new or expanded school buildings. This impact tax increases when any school in a cluster exceeds 105% of the growth policy capacity level.

Education Committee Meeting

At a November 18 Education Committee meeting, the chairman of the committee, Councilmember Michael Subin, threatened to recommend that the county spend no money on school construction projects next year if the state does not do its part to pay for the \$126.2 million in projects eligible for state aid. Subin warned this could stop development of new homes.

"In any cluster to go over capacity, it will be my recommendation to shut that cluster [to development]," Subin said. County residents should thank the Councilmember for taking this firm stand, and urge him to accept the MCPS figures for school capacity. We should encourage all of the Councilmembers to act to stop new home building in any area where school enrollment is projected at 100% of the MCPS capacity level. It is a crucial step, since overcrowding can continue to worsen even if new development is stopped in a cluster. This is because some 80% of school crowding is due to new families with school age children moving into existing homes, a situation the growth policy cannot address.

The real answer is for the State to come forth with their share of funding needed for new and expanded schools. We urge you to let your senator and delegates to the Maryland General Assembly know Montgomery County needs adequate school funding. In a county where there are 720 "temporary" classroom trailers in school yards, and the Planning Board this year has approved plans for more than 6,200 new homes with another 32,000 already approved but not yet built, something must be done to correct the problem of school overcrowding. The Council could act by conducting a much needed reexamination of the new growth policy and its flawed school capacity test.