

"Federation Corner" column
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MCPS education policy clouded by politics

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Any attempt to summarize an issue as complex as the fate of the Seven Locks Elementary School is almost certain to fail, at least in part because so many people have so many strong feelings and differing perspectives. What follows is my personal attempt at a snapshot.

The Board of Education has voted that, instead of remodeling/expanding the existing Seven Locks Elementary School (ES), it will build a new school on the nearby Kendale Road site. The new school will be quite large (more than 700 student capacity) and reflects the need to modernize the existing Seven Locks ES, as well as deal with overcrowding at Potomac ES. Many citizens of the Seven Locks area are waging a vigorous effort to reverse this decision (www.save7locksschool.org), but plans to build the new school are already well underway.

Until late 2003, it was understood that the existing Seven Locks ES would be upgraded and extensive plans had been developed toward that end. But the County Council and County Executive were working on a plan to deal with the lack of 'affordable housing' in Montgomery County and had asked various county agencies to identify properties that might be 'unneeded' and thus could be turned over to the county for affordable housing. The Kendale Road site was on the County Executive's initial list, and there is reason to believe that the decision to build a new ES on it is the first step to deciding that the Seven Locks site is 'unneeded' and should be turned over to the County - possibly for high density affordable housing that is not part of the Master Plan and would eliminate a local community center and heavily used playing fields.

Unfortunately, whatever happens in this case, the outcome will leave a bitter taste in the mouths of many and will be questioned. Numerous public officials have been neither consistent nor transparent in their statements, nor have they been convincing in their arguments. Many people have played on - or raised questions about the sincerity of - the 'motives' of others. Citizens have questioned the motives of public officials who have failed to advance affordable housing, but now urge the use of potential school sites for housing at a time when so many of our children attend classes in portables and under circumstances where no plan can guarantee that even the mandated percentage of newly constructed housing units will in fact be of the affordable variety.

While most of the outspoken citizens appear genuinely concerned about educational programs, some are clearly objecting to high-density, 'affordable' housing in their neighborhoods. And while most school supporters recognize the need to argue for consistent policies that balance the needs of all, the temptation to accept a solution that addresses short term needs can be overwhelming. It is exceedingly difficult to decide if the Superintendent and the Board of Education have made their decision based on "hard numbers", "best practices" and realistic scenarios, as opposed to political pressures to provide land for developers or concerns about ways to guarantee an uninterrupted flow of tax dollars to support the ever-growing needs of our school system.

The MCCF Education Committee is continuing to research this issue, in the context of the policies and practices of the Board of Education, the Montgomery County Public Schools, the County Council, and the County Executive. We will have more to say about these matters, but the 'rush to decision' in this instance has been much too fast to allow adequate, thoughtful, public debate.

It has been my contention that politics and public education policy should not be - but all too often are - allowed to mix. The path we have all trodden, the one that leads us to the current apparent destination of a new school on the Kendale Road site, also has the consequence of allowing perceptions of insincerity to grow to the point where few trust the validity of the conclusions reached. Whether or not a new school is constructed on the Kendale site, whether or not the Seven Locks site is surplussed, whether or not public dollars are wisely spent, whether or not the children of our community are well served: all these "facts" will be forever clouded by doubts in the minds of many. And that is NOT the way we should run our County, nor educate our kids.