

"Federation Corner" column
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MCPS funding: the need for fiscal responsibility and transparency of purpose

By Mark R. Adelman
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The following is the complete text upon which I based my (condensed) oral testimony before the Montgomery County Council at its May 3 public hearing concerning the "FY05-10 CIP Amendments for MCPS". The questions posed to me by several Council Members indicated that they felt I do not understand the difference between the Operating and Capital budgets (I do) and that I had obscured the difference between the two (to some extent I did, because I feel we need to have a more open dialogue about the relationship between these two "pots of money"). Unfortunately, the format of such testimony (a long stream of three minute readings) does not lend itself to the kind of dialogue that is needed. I hope, in a future Federation Corner article, to elaborate on these assertions.

Mr. President, Members of the Council, my name is Mark R. Adelman, I am here testifying as the Chair of the Education Committee of the Montgomery County Civic Federation. Our comments are intended to offer advice on two issues before you, related to MCPS CIP matters. They are distinct but, in our opinion, related issues. The first concerns the request for some \$4 million to cover expected cost overruns in the construction of four new elementary schools. The second is the revised priority listing for school construction, which continues to include construction of a new elementary school on the Kendale Road site, to replace the existing Seven Locks ES. We do not argue with the need for funds to proceed with construction of the four new elementary schools. Rather we point out that those funds can be "found", if you, the Board of Education, and the Superintendent would listen to the information provided you by the coalition of parents and citizens. We urge that, instead of building a new school to replace Seven Locks, simply proceed with the upgrade of the existing Seven Locks ES. This plan was on the books before you and the Superintendent saw, in the workforce-housing proposal of the County Executive, a wisdom that we do NOT perceive. The Save Seven Locks Coalition even proposed a staged approach to the upgrade of the school that would further reduce costs. This is a level of flexibility that you and MCPS ought to emulate.

You have recently asked those testifying before you to make suggestions as to how to close looming budget gaps quite ignoring the fact that many of the deficits would either not exist, or would be much smaller, had you heeded citizen testimony in the past. We hope you will heed this testimony. While \$4 million is arguably a very small amount in comparison to the entire County budget (some 50% of which goes to MCPS) it is in fact no small amount compared to the budget deficit that is causing your current heartburn. The Superintendent has indicated to the Board that the money is available from "excess bond funds". But the \$4 million needed to meet the rise in projected costs of those four new elementary schools is also available as part of the amount that the hard-working members of the Save Seven Locks Coalition have shown can be saved by upgrading the existing school rather than building an entirely new one on a site whose adequacy is very questionable. We do not ask you to deny MCPS the funds needed for those cost overruns. Neither should you ask County taxpayers to pony up those dollars when MCPS is insisting on wasting so much money on an unneeded, unwanted and ill-conceived school construction project. Give MCPS the money it needs to cover those cost overruns, but make that action dependent on overall fiscal responsibility. Require that MCPS proceed with the previously-planned upgrade of SLES, unless it can provide accurate, consistent numbers that convinces concerned citizens that a new school on the Kendale site is really more cost effective. And be sure to include ALL the costs of establishing the proposed new school.

By the way: if the Superintendent is correct about those "excess bond funds", why not use them to help reduce the County budget deficit? And please don't tell us about problems related to funds being available

in one fiscal year but needed in another. Surely you can find a way to put aside any "excess funds" for the next "rainy day". That is the fiscally responsible thing to do and that is what we are advising. We would much prefer that you listen to our advice now than provide us yet another opportunity, in the future, to say "we told you so".