

"Federation Corner" column
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Sorry, but that's not good enough...

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Perhaps the sad saga of the Seven Locks ES will turn out OK, perhaps not. In my column last week I restated MCCF's opposition to the MCPS decision to build a new school on the Kendale Road site rather than upgrade the existing Seven Locks ES; and I gave two website URLs for more information (<http://www.montgomerycivic.org/index.asp> and <http://www.save7locksschool.org/>). Since that time Superintendent Weast and several members of the Board of Education (BoE) have made statements indicating that the existing Seven Locks ES will NOT be surplused; and others have made statements opposing this position. While concerned citizens struggle to determine what these statements do or do not mean, let me make a simple definitive statement: Sorry Dr. Weast, but that's not good enough (TNGE). TNGE on many counts.

Not everyone who has followed this mess believes that the Superintendent and the BoE can be trusted to stick by their promises, since their words seem to sway wildly in the political winds. Many feel that any such "policy" is unwise and, in any case, cannot be simply established by fiat, without mandated public comment. And so on. But what seems to have gotten lost in all this is that the original decision to build a new school on the Kendale Road site has STILL not been adequately justified. And the true cost - to the taxpayer - of the entire project has NOT been clearly revealed. TNGE. The Kendale Road school project should NOT be allowed to begin unless/until a full and honest justification is forthcoming.

The precipitating agent for all of this was our County Executive and he has yet to produce any real definition of, or data regarding the need for, workforce housing, much less a rational argument for how using "unneeded" MCPS parcels is going to help fix our housing problem. Given the multiple failures of the Department of Housing and Community Affairs over the past decade, I would argue that the current county administration has NO credibility regarding its commitment to dealing with problems of affordable housing in our County...other than to come up with new slogans and "initiatives." We all "know" there is a housing problem, but what do we REALLY know about the details of the problem? And how can we fix it if we don't know the details? TNGE.

Now, you might argue that, if we end up with BOTH a new school at Kendale Road AND a "saved" Seven Locks, what's so bad? Two schools is better than one, right? Well it's not just where we end up, it's how we get there. If we get there by flawed process and politicians backing-and-filling to play to the most vocal group (be it Civic Federation or a local PTA or the African American Parents of Montgomery County) it is just not a reasoned and consistent discourse. And right now we REALLY need that! When MCPS and the BoE acknowledge that the Second Grade Global Screening Process isn't working and then fiddle with "re-centering" the scores, while a large number of our kids are "tracked" into a second-class curriculum, how are we to grade that? TNGE.

I want to return to a thread I tried to weave into last week's column: the notion that - as our county approaches "build out" (and Park and Planning begins to sanctify the vision of "build-up") - we need to keep in mind the need for our backyard - that precious commodity called open space. Open space is NOT some abstract concept. The Seven Locks Coalition is fighting the fight for a number of reasons and one of those is that our schools and their playing fields ARE our community centers and our backyards. Take a look at the plans for the school on the Kendale Road site and ask yourself why the playing fields are so small and carved out of adjacent woodlands. TNGE. We, as a community, have rules as to how much space must be allocated to a school, and the numbers we have agreed upon include a large

amount of space for things other than buildings - as they should. What happens if we cram schools onto sites that are too small, then take up space intended to provide breathing room with portables, and obfuscate about what will/ will not happen to older schools that DO have adequate space? As I biologist I know what happens to rats when you overcrowd them. We are getting seriously overcrowded. TNGE!

This is much broader than just the Seven Locks issue. You can use the TNGE stamp on your favorite issues. The principle is the same. The County Executive, and many members of our County Council, campaigned on a pledge to "end gridlock". And the current status of traffic flow? TNGE. In its final stages, funding for that grandiose arts center we call Strathmore Hall was increased "just one more time" because those who felt it was essential to "our county" promised to pay back the community for the excessive costs. That promise has yet to result in any dollars being put back into the public coffers, and the last time I checked, the promise was that the munificent sum of \$50,000 was to be paid in the NEXT fiscal year. Think about that when you are sitting at the intersection of Tuckerman and 355. TNGE. And think about how much REAL benefit YOU will realize from the construction of the ICC. TNGE.

But this column is, after all, just supposed to focus on Education. And I am, by vocation, an educator. So let me return to the final thread of last week's column. In a democracy we make informed decisions about those we choose to lead us. And we help them make the "best" decisions. By the way in which we - and they - make those decisions, we educate one-another. The process by which we have gotten from "there" to "here" on the Seven Locks ES issue is - sadly - educational. It says a lot about how much we value reasoned thought and discourse and what we believe we should be teaching our kids. And - once again - TNGE.