

"Federation Corner" column
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Jerry Weast: School Superintendent or real estate deal maker?

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MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast has established a record on education that is praised by some and criticized by others. However, his record as a real estate deal maker with his partner, the Board of Education (BOE) has few admirers and many critics. Shortly after his arrival in September 1999, Weast was looking to "replace the aging [Carver] school headquarters with a commercial complex financed by private developers" which would include space for MCPS administrative offices. Establishing a pattern repeated with Seven Locks Elementary School (SLES), a group of eight neighboring civic associations banded together to oppose this development scheme, calling themselves the "Coalition for Responsible Use of School Land."

In an April 2001 letter, the group wrote: "School land should be preserved for school purposes. The Carver site is the only available land for future school construction in this part of the county. Developing the site would squander this valuable resource. Although MCPS claims new school sites are not needed, Rockville is still growing and MCPS has a poor record in forecasting future school needs. For example, Julius West Middle School, modernized and enlarged just a few years ago, is already overcrowded."

These Rockville residents were joined by county and city historic preservationists and former Carver High School students who were determined to save the original building constructed of quality materials for black students in 1951 in the waning days of segregation. The original building and a "viewshed" of the building from the main road was historically designated by Rockville in January 2003, despite the BOE getting an opinion in August 2002 from the Attorney General saying that, as a state agency, it did not have to follow county or city historic preservation or zoning laws.

In late 2003, MCPS sought to swap land with a warehouse it owned on North Stonestreet Avenue in East Rockville for land with a warehouse near Montgomery Village. "The school system, in conjunction with developer Centex, in early 2004 introduced plans for a residential development on the 12-acre North Stonestreet property to area residents at Rockville City Hall. The density proposed 'more than 200 units' and conflicted with a city master plan developed by residents in the East Rockville and Lincoln Park neighborhoods. Residents and city officials wanted a density of 80 to 100 units on that site. [The] East Rockville Civic Association president said the school system behaves like a bully, never telling ahead of time what it's going to do."

In an April 2005 Gazette article, "Weast came across as patronizing and 'almost arrogant' while touring the [Carver] building," [Rockville Mayor Larry] Giammo said. 'The implication of what he told me that first meeting was he had some very clear objectives and that I better not get in his way,' the mayor said in an interview last month. It left him with an impression of Weast that continues today. 'It's not always necessary to take the destructive, kind of bullying approach,' Giammo said. 'There's many of us out here that would much prefer to work collaboratively with MCPS as opposed to being made to feel like we need to kowtow to them on every issue.'

" 'One person's bully is another person's strong, effective leader,' said Board of Education member Stephen N. Abrams (Dist. 2) of Rockville. 'And again, that description can apply on the other side of the street,' School board President Patricia B. O'Neill (Dist. 3) of Bethesda called Weast an educator with a business mind, who is aggressively executing the board's policy. 'Are the alpha male Larry Giammo and alpha male Jerry Weast destined to clash?' she said. 'I don't know, because if that's the case, the kids are destined to lose.' "

Concerning problems with Rockville High School's delayed reopening: "Giammo shot back, stating MCPS & Weast and school system facilities director Richard Hawes, in particular 'blame the city when projects falter.' This led to this response, with a theme familiar to those involved in SLES: 'As an entity of the state, the school system is not subject to city zoning or, arguably, inspection,' board member Abrams said. 'The city does not have as much leverage as they think they do,' he said. 'Occasionally, the school system will act like a relatively good Samaritan and put up with [city oversight], but we don't have to. And that's something the mayor probably hasn't learned yet.' "

Earlier this month, Weast and BOE lost decisively on his third real estate deal, when the County Council voted to not support building a new SLES on the Kendale site. This effort had begun in October 2003 in response to a request by the County Executive, and later by a County Council committee, to surplus several supposedly unneeded school sites for use for affordable housing. Weast told the BOE in February 2004, after describing recent actions by Fairfax County to work with developers, that Montgomery County could do the same and "In return, through a public-private partnership, the county could request proposals from private firms to both develop the selected sites in accordance with the approved land use plans for workforce housing and use the value of the property to provide funding for the construction of needed school projects."

While a number of people who have fought to save SLES for the last 2 1/2 years blame certain elected County officials for starting the SLES mess, it should be clear that Weast the dealmaker needed little prompting to start the chain of events on his third deal that, in the end, left little deal to make other than to try to "win" by building on Kendale by any means available.

A July 1999 Washington Post article titled: "Montgomery's New School Chief Loved, Hated" stated that when residents of Guilford County, North Carolina learned that, after six years as their school superintendent, Weast was going to Montgomery County "viewers were calling in to a local TV show, overwhelmingly urging Weast to go 'Jerry, tell me where you live, I'll help you pack your bags.' To his critics, Weast is a self-promoter who can't be trusted. An egotist who looks good on paper and tears around town, car phone in hand."

With jobs before here that lasted no more than 6 years, Weast's nearly 7 years in this county represent the longest period of time he has been employed in one place. Should he announce tomorrow that he was moving on, it should come as no surprise if numerous county residents were to offer to help him pack his bags. On the other hand, if he demonstrates that he is truly sincere about changing his behavior by retiring from the deal making business and learning to listen to the people, he may still have a chance to renew his welcome.