

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel

Federation opposes selling surplus school property

by Peggy Dennis
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The following article appeared as part of the President's Message in the December 2010 issue of the Montgomery County Civic Federation newsletter.

On Tuesday, November 23, I testified before the County Council on the issue of the proposed sale of the old Peary High School (land and school facilities) to the Melvin Berman Hebrew Academy. Paula Bienenfeld testified on behalf of the Civic Federation and I testified as an individual. The focus of my testimony was the Federation's longstanding position opposing the sale of surplus school properties. This position was originally formulated years ago when the county was considering selling the Belt Middle School to another religious school, restated in regards to the Peary High School in 2005, and again brought up in regard to the proposed sale of Seven Locks Elementary School.

Our conclusion then and now is that our public schools and sites for future schools constitute a precious and irreplaceable form of public patrimony. Many of these schools and "future school sites" have been offered by developers as the quid pro quo for getting approval for developments that significantly increase the number of students in MCPS schools. They represent the high value that MCPS places on "community schools" – schools that provide free and excellent education to all children living within a given geographic area. They also constitute a vote of confidence in the county's future and its continued growth.

Without sufficient public school capacity and sites for future educational needs, the county will face either grossly overcrowded public schools, or new schools in high density areas such as White Flint that have been squeezed onto very small sites like those in the urban center of the District. For our elected officials to sell off such a precious commodity shows a remarkable lack of foresight and vision. Though not needed now or in the "foreseeable future" (25 years was suggested as a time frame) these resources should remain retrievable for the public school system in the more distant future when needs change, as change they must.

The Federation supports the leasing of MCPS schools to private and religiously-affiliated schools when declining enrollment at a specific school dictates redistricting and sending MCPS students to other nearby public schools. We strongly believe, however, that this measure should never permit the permanent loss of the school. Past MCPS leases have often included a clause giving the lessee the "option to purchase" the school. Many parents of Berman Hebrew Academy students discussed the history of the school and the amount of money spent in renovating it before it could again be used as a school, and expressed that this gave them the right to buy the school.

It was personally distressing to those few of us who testified in opposition to the proposed sale that we were loudly booed, hissed at and personally vilified as anti-Semites. But we would have opposed the sale whether it was to a Catholic, Evangelical or Muslim religious school or to a non-denominational private school seeking to buy the MCPS facility. The principle remains the same.

Demographic trends change. Individual communities, like the population in general, go through demographic waves with first buyers often having lots of kids in the neighborhood public school, kids grow up and move out, empty nesters age and sell their homes, and new waves of families with young children move in. A valuable and irreplaceable public resource such as a public school should never be

permanently lost to the public. This is even more important in the down-county where future growth – “smart growth” – will be targeted for the foreseeable and probably distant future.

Follow-up: Since release of the above article in the December MCCF newsletter, the County Council voted 8 to 1 at their November 30 session--the last session of the past Council--to sell the former Peary High School facility to the Berman Hebrew Academy. Councilmember Phil Andrews (D.-Dist. 3) was the lone opposing vote. Then, at the initial session of the new County Council on December 7, Mr. Andrews and co-sponsor Councilmember Valerie Ervin (D.--Dist. 5) introduced Bill 58-10, to prevent the Council from approving the sale of surplus school property after October 31 of a year in which county elections are held. The public hearing on this bill is scheduled for January 18 at 1:30 p.m.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net