

"Federation Corner" column
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Selecting the site for a second middle school in the B-CC cluster

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Chevy Chase and North Chevy Chase elementary schools are the only two in the county school system that still include sixth grade, and they are hitting or have passed their classroom capacity. Chevy Chase Elementary School remains close to its student limit. North Chevy Chase last year exceeded its capacity, 230, by 165 students; and there are already four classroom trailers located on the grounds to handle the overcapacity. But if the sixth graders from these two schools were sent to Westland, the only middle school in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster, then it would exceed its capacity.

A couple of decades ago there were other middle schools in this downcounty area, although in those days they were called "junior high schools" and attended by seventh through ninth graders.

Leland Junior High School was located on Elm Street in Chevy Chase, east of Wisconsin Avenue. In the Fall of 1963 a new four-story Leland was built on this site, to replace the old structure which was originally built to house Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School prior to that school's move to the East West Highway campus it presently occupies. But after operating for only 18 years, the "new" Leland Junior High School was closed in 1981 and razed, and its students were transferred to Western Junior High School (renamed Westland to reflect the merger).

Kensington Junior High School, located on Saul Road about three miles from B-CC High School as the crow flies, was closed in 1979 and the property was conveyed by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to the county government in 1991.

Who could have guessed back then that the county population and public school enrollment would grow, and we might need these school facilities in the future? (And they wonder why students' parents and county taxpayers have no faith in the MCPS demographers!) So, now there is a need for a second middle school in the B-CC cluster.

The Board of Education Requested FY2012 Capital Budget authorized a site selection process to identify a possible site. Who cares that the County Council will not actually vote on the MCPS FY2012 Capital Budget until next month? Last Fall a 26 member Site Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC) was appointed by MCPS Facilities Management staff. The group met twice--in mid-December and this past January--and issued its report and recommendations on March 8.

Ten sites were considered by the SSAC:

1. the site of the former Leland Junior High School, now location of the Jane Lawton Community Recreation Center which houses the offices of the Town of Chevy Chase;
2. the site of the former Kensington Junior High School, now titled to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) and used as a local park;
3. the site of the former Lynnbrook Elementary School (now used for MCPS physical disabilities, childcare, and alternative programs) and adjacent Lynwood Local Park;
4. the site of the former Rollingwood Elementary School (now leased to a private educational facility);
5. the site of the former Montgomery Hills Junior High School (outside the B-CC cluster borders, and now leased to a private educational institution);
6. Grace Episcopal School (site of the former Larchmont Elementary School closed in 1980 and subsequently sold to Grace Episcopal Church);

7. Norwood Local Park, located just south of Bethesda;
8. North Chevy Chase Local Park, on Jones Bridge Road in Chevy Chase;
9. Rosemary Hills/Lyttonsville Local Park, site of the Gwendolyn E. Coffield Community Center; and,
10. a site located on Lyttonsville Road, owned by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission.

What was the group's conclusion? "The SSAC recommends that the Rosemary Hills/Lyttonsville Local Park site be selected as the site for the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Middle School #2, with the Rock Creek Hills Local Park site recommended as an alternate."

That's right, the SSAC recommended two sites currently used as local parks. Their report notes that Lyttonsville Local Park includes "a 6.65 acres parcel on this site, improved with a softball field, was acquired with Program Open Space funds. Approval by the State of Maryland would be required prior to any development for non-park use." It then states that the "existing softball field may be lost by school construction, but there is space to provide adequate parking and playground space." So the neighbors and prospective middle school students would lose the softball field, but never mind...there will be plenty of parking.

The report notes that "the site selection process enables MCPS planning and facilities staff to work with county agencies and the PTA community when considering sites for school construction." It also states "a feasibility study to determine the scope and cost for a new middle school is scheduled for Spring 2011." Again, who cares that the Council won't vote on the funding for that study until next month? It's "full speed ahead" on selecting a site, and designing and building a middle school which we've known for years that we need.

One detail the Board of Education has overlooked is asking the residents of the neighborhoods surrounding the various sites what they think. But then, citizen inclusion in decision making has never been one of the Board's strong points.

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