

"Federation Corner" column  
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## **Limits to growth, Part 2**

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*This is the second in a series of planned columns looking into growth related issues*

In this column last week we looked at the expected growth in Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) enrollment of an additional 10,000 students during the next five years, and asked where the school system would find the room for these additional students. We must also ask where the land will be found in the coming twenty-five to fifty years.

As long as growth remains the mantra of the business community and the development industry, this and related questions will need to be addressed, and perhaps more creatively than in the past. What worked in the 1950s and '60s will not provide the solutions for the twenty-first century.

At the June 30 joint meeting of the county Board of Education (BoE) and the Planning Board, BoE member Pat O'Neill reminded all that the county's pattern of growth has shifted from the upcounty back to the downcounty, where redevelopment to promote higher population densities is the "wave of the future." The Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster now needs a second middle school. It was the botched site selection process for this new middle school which caused a public uproar and created the need for the joint meeting.

At the meeting, Ms. O'Neill also pointed out that the BoE had been adamant about the White Flint area needing a new elementary school to accommodate anticipated growth. She also noted that because of the high cost of large parcels of land in the built-out downcounty, there are limited options for finding appropriate sites that the county can afford to buy for this and other new schools.

Casey Anderson, the newest appointee to the Planning Board, asked about the possibility of reacquiring former MCPS facilities that have been surplus and then sold or leased to private institutions or repurposed for other uses by county government. Retaking former public school buildings that are no longer in the MCPS inventory may be legally difficult and costly. While some may argue that it is too expensive and time consuming a process, I think it should always be our first choice. The BoE should release an analysis of these costs versus those for acquiring land for a new site and building a new school, and let citizens weigh in on the decision. We are talking about major allocations of public resources and funding here, and county residents should be considered a primary stakeholder in the issue.

Reacquiring former MCPS properties which have been surplus, the buildings removed, and land turned over to other entities of county government, would be the next best choice for finding sites for our future new public schools. And it was this strategy that was eventually adopted by a BoE appointed advisory committee in selecting the former Kensington Junior High School property as the site for a second B-CC cluster middle school.

This reacquiring of former public school buildings and land should go hand in hand with changes in other MCPS policies. For instance, they should reverse their "bigger is better" policy

of closing small neighborhood elementary schools and redistricting the school boundaries to create much larger elementary schools.

Our small neighborhood elementary schools serve us very well for many reasons, first and foremost being the well-being of the children themselves. Small children often feel safer and more comfortable and they learn more effectively in small, nurturing environments. Children can more easily walk or bike to schools serving a small area. Through school functions and PTAs, neighborhood school helps define and knit together our residential communities. They bring together many adult residents who might otherwise never meet one another. This contribution of schools to community building is one reason the residents of Randolph Hills would love to see their Rocking Horse Road Elementary School, now an MCPS administrative center, reopened. Many parents of school aged children would view the reopening of small neighborhood schools as an inherently good thing and not just a strategy to relieve overcrowding.

The MCPS currently has a minimum requirement of “seven flat acres” for an elementary school and substantially larger requirements for middle and high schools. These minimum sizes for school sites were reasonable and feasible in the days when the county was “building out” and developers of new subdivisions could be required to set aside acreage for future public schools. But we won’t find new large tracts of land in the downcounty. The county will have to rethink how it uses the properties it already owns and be more creative in many facets of school construction and renovation.

If existing schools are demolished and rebuilt, school parking lots should be sized to accommodate teachers, staff and a very few visitors. Providing large lots for occasional events with large attendance is neither cost-effective nor environmentally friendly. And parking should be built under the school building itself. Underground structured parking is more expensive than surface lots, but it has a number of non-financial benefits.

Environmentally, underground parking puts almost no additional impervious surface on the site, causes no loss of trees, and generates no stormwater runoff. It does not absorb heat on sunny days and create heat islands adding to high temperatures in summer. And it doesn’t have to be plowed during snow events. Has anyone calculated the financial costs of the lost school days in 2009-2010 when the entire MCPS system was closed waiting for school parking lots to be plowed?

Finally, providing parking under new schools would be welcomed by school employees who would no longer have to race to their cars in the rain while carrying boxes of homework to be graded, or drive home in sweltering cars on hot, sunny days. Undergrounding of parking makes as much sense for our schools as it does for apartment buildings and office complexes. Putting a dollar value on the environmental and quality of life benefits may be challenging, but these cost calculations are just another aspect of Pat O’Neill’s “wave of the future”.

*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](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*