

"Federation Corner" column
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Limits to growth, Part 3

by Peggy Dennis
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This is the third in a series of columns looking at expected county growth and the need to meet growing school enrollment with increased classroom capacity.

This column treats the June 30 joint meeting between the Board of Education (BoE) and the Planning Board, and a second joint meeting on July 25 which was held before the Planning, Housing and Economic Development Committee of the County Council.

Much of the discussion at both meetings focused on the conflict between growing needs and constricted resources. Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) planners acknowledge that enrollments are projected to rise faster than we can build new schools and renovate and expand old ones to accommodate them. Trailers (portables) will continue to be required to keep up with the overflow.

Councilmember Marc Elrich was justifiably tough on past actions by the BoE and the Council which had resulted in both schools and future school sites being declared "surplus" and sold off. He described the actions as the "self-inflicted wounds" and now causing a "horrible problem for the county" in areas where residential growth is taking place but sites for new schools are lacking. (Note that it was only last year the Council voted to sell Peary High School to the Berman Hebrew Academy over the objections of the BoE.)

With significant space shortages in over half the schools in the county, Mr. Elrich criticized MCPS demographic forecasters for their poor record on long term enrollment and capacity projections. And he asked the BoE and MCPS for a list of all properties and facilities MCPS used to own that might somehow be retrieved to meet future needs.

Charles Barkley, Chairman of the BoE, suggested that from now on our school planners may need to look at designing multi-storied schools and building upwards instead of designing schools with the large, sprawling footprints of the past. Particularly in the down county, it will be impossible to find the large, undeveloped land parcels required for traditional schools. BoE member Pat O'Neill reminded attendees that the Board had been adamant that a new elementary school would be needed to accommodate the residential growth permitted in the recently approved White Flint master plan. While traditional designs have required a minimum of 7 "flat acres" for an elementary school, in the White Flint area the only remaining dedicated future school site is 4.2 acres.

Building codes require that elementary schools have core facilities (administrative offices, food preparation and cafeterias) plus classrooms for kindergartens and first grades on the ground level. These requirements constrain the extent to which an elementary school's footprint can be shrunk, but in cases like White Flint it may be necessary to have media centers, science and computer labs, and classrooms for second through fifth grades stacked above. Middle and high school spatial needs are even greater, but building codes permit these schools to grow up to five stories high. Mr. Barkley pointed out that middle and high schools have more needs for playing fields and tennis courts; another reason to shrink the footprints and build upwards.

Members of the BoE and MCPS staff brought up the need for more school buses, school bus depots, and maintenance facilities. Councilmember Nancy Floreen acknowledged the problem that much in school layout and design has been done to facilitate "parent driving." I suggest that we solve both problems by allowing fewer school buses and instituting the old bi-pedal alternative. Children used to be responsible for getting to

school on their own two feet, even in inclement weather. Remember wearing raincoats and galoshes, parkas, mittens and winter boots? Except in the agriculture reserve where many kids live miles from school, there's no good reason why the majority of our kids must be bused or driven to school.

Our children need daily exercise; walking or bicycling to and from school would improve their fitness, health and ability to concentrate in the classroom. Yet the county's Safe Routes to Schools program is only in effect at a few elementary schools. I suggest that it be expanded to cover all public schools. Where is the BoE on this issue? Is the BoE willing to work with the county's Department of Transportation to expand the Safe Routes to Schools program and make walking and biking a top school transportation priority?

I suggest, again, that planners maximize green space and athletic fields by minimizing parking lots and building them under school buildings. If our high schools provided no parking spaces for student drivers but did provide buses to take athletes to and from practices and competitions at other schools--a much safer alternative than making these kids drive or catch rides with other young drivers--high school parking lots could be much smaller, and more students would walk and bike.

Laura Berthiaume, BoE member, expressed the need for a better school site selection process. Planning Board Chairman Françoise Carrier agreed and decried the fact that the site selection for a second Bethesda-Chevy Chase middle school was carried out with minimal participation afforded one staffer from the Planning Department. She lamented the fact that most of the sites considered were parks, and asked that in future the Planning Department and Board be given more of a voice in school site selection.

Mary Bradford, Parks Director, objected to the wording in the list of possible school sites that refers to parks as "vacant land". Just because there is no building on a park, it does not follow that the land is not in use. She reminded attendees that our parks are the green and natural spaces--the playgrounds and yes, dog walking areas--for many of our neighborhoods, particularly in more densely populated parts of the county. The role of the Parks Department, after all, is to provide and maintain parks for all residents to use and enjoy and not to provide school sites. Councilmember Nancy Floreen backed this position saying that she wants our parks protected and fewer parks appearing on school site selection lists. We heartily concur!

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