

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - May 2, 2013

What is next for the Brickyard Middle School site?

by Peggy Dennis
MCCF Immediate Past President

Two weeks ago I attended a meeting of the Potomac Elementary School PTA and other concerned residents of Potomac. The topic of the meeting was the long-awaited modernization of Potomac Elementary School (PES). Four community meetings had already been held to obtain community feedback on the design options under consideration by the school construction division of the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). Then two more community meetings were suddenly added to the meeting roster in order to obtain feedback on a new proposal: locating the new PES on the Brickyard Road school site.

History and tradition alone would urge keeping PES at its current location. The Potomac Village goes back into the 19th century, with the elementary school being a force in the community for over 90 years. Although the current school dates from the 1960s, its location has been a fundamental fixture of the village's footprint for many decades.

Smart Growth dictates that density and public services should be clustered and focused together. Facilities such as stores, libraries and schools - especially elementary schools - belong in close proximity. People with children at PES do their errands in the village after dropping children at the school, on their way to pick up kids after school, and as they come and go from volunteering at the school. Its location is part of the social and commercial fabric of the village.

At the present location, the children can take walkable field trips to the library. With more sidewalks coming to the town center, the current location is perfect for a Safe Routes to School program to encourage more children to walk and bike to school. As for parking, when there are big school events that require overflow parking the lot at the church next door, and spaces along the sides of Gary Road, provide needed excess capacity.

The current location can be reached by public transit, being only a one block walk from the T2 MetroBus stop. River Road already has turning lanes for traffic entering the school, and the proposed rebuild options call for a second entrance/exit which would certainly improve traffic conditions.

The current location is highly rational when you look at a map of the area served by PES (see map at <http://gis.mcpsmd.org/ServiceAreaMaps/PotomacES.pdf>). Most of the children come from the area out River Road to the west of the Village. The Brickyard location could not be further removed from the majority of these families and would increase the travel time for many children attending the school, especially during the morning rush hour. Potomac Village is already a bottleneck during rush hour and would become worse with lines of school buses stacked up at the traffic lights in the village center. Using the Brickyard site would require construction of additional turning lanes, and also require a much larger parking lot than at the current location as well as the widening of Brickyard Road. These three requirements would boost construction costs and probably push back the timeline for completion.

Officials from MCPS acknowledged that the only advantage to relocating PES to the Brickyard site is that the children would be able to continue at the present school while the new building was under construction, rather than being bused to a holding school during the year and a half long process needed for modernization of the existing school facility. Since this situation is endured by all MCPS students when their schools undergo modernization, sparing PES students this temporary inconvenience by creating a school in a permanently inconvenient location makes no sense at all.

Finally, common sense dictates not moving PES to the Brickyard Road site because the twenty acre site is sized for a middle school. Given the population growth that our elected officials are forecasting and promoting, it is entirely possible that later in the current century the Churchill cluster will need an additional middle school. If the current PES site is “surplused” and put to another use, and the Brickyard site is encumbered by an elementary school, our options for future educational facilities growth will be severely restricted. Keeping PES at its present site gives us greater flexibility and resources to meet future needs.

I suggest that the Montgomery County Board of Education return to the *status quo ante* and resume leasing the Brickyard Road school site for agriculture and related educational purposes. For the past 30-plus years, this land has been operated as an organic farm. Recently, the Brickyard Educational Farm (with website at www.brickyardeducationalfarm.org) added an educational component that has been missing from our standard K-12 public school curriculum: teaching children about where our food comes from and how it is produced.

In the short time it was up and running, the Brickyard Educational Farm has had more than 600 children visit on field trips to learn and gain hands-on experience. If permitted to resume its work, the farm will remain the perfect setting for young people to learn about a range of topics, including soil, water, plants, composting, insects, seed saving, sustainable agriculture, organic food production, human health, and the interconnections between them.

The Brickyard Road site in Potomac owned by MCPS could be so well used and benefit so many thousands of young students. We can only hope that those in charge of our educational system will have the vision to enable the remarkable group of young educators running the Brickyard Educational Farm to remain on the site and expand their work. If they are allowed to continue to steward this land until such time as it is needed for a middle school, Montgomery County will be a better place for one and all.

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