

"Federation Corner" column
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Steep price tag for new Rockville elementary school

by Christina Ginsberg
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On March 12, 2014, the County may get its wish to put a deluxe office building for bureaucrats in a residential neighborhood. The Childrens Resource Center (CRC), at the Broome Middle School property on Twinbrook Parkway east of Veirs Mill Road, is a \$14 million, forty-four thousand square foot office building that underwent a County "Master Plan" process without any notices being sent out to the residents of the surrounding Twinbrook Forest subdivision before the County Council and County Executive signed off on the project.

The trajectory of studies, approvals, public outreach and record-keeping without transparency is eerily similar to what occurred with respect to other projects such as the Brickyard School site and the Seven Locks Elementary School site where the County intended to appropriate those sites for other uses.

The County considers the CRC project a pre-condition for building Richard Montgomery Elementary School No. 5, long a goal for successive Rockville Mayors who have complained for years about overcrowding at Beall Elementary School and other elementary schools in Rockville.

The County has yoked the building of Elementary School No. 5 with the new office building, effectively increasing the cost of building Elementary School No. 5 by \$14 million dollars. The decision to relocate the CRC to the Broome property appears to have originated in the County Executive's office.

According to MCPS documents, after languishing for more than 20 years while housing a methadone clinic and other marginal uses, Broome is slated to be renovated as a middle school holding school serving upper Montgomery County. The Broome site is one of the smallest middle-school sites in the County and the addition of an office building on the site further compromises its ability to support a middle school with amenities comparable to other middle schools in the County.

Project manager Kassa Seyoum first approached neighborhood residents in April 2013, well after the project had been approved and funded by the County Council, with the news that the project was set to go. The County is participating in a "mandatory referral" process with the City of Rockville's and has held four meetings with Twinbrook Forest residents. I personally distributed fliers advertising the meetings since the County notices were "content-free" and went out to few residents.

At each meeting, residents were told over and over again by Mr. Seyoum, by David Dise (the Director of the County's Department of General Services) and by other County officials, that the CRC office building is "a done deal."

Documents obtained by our organization shows that as early as 2010 the County was studying options for co-locating the CRC with Richard Montgomery Cluster Elementary School #5. Residents in Hungerford raised substantive concerns with the CRC co-location, and the County's report cited those concerns as a legitimate need to relocate the CRC from the Hungerford site. However, although Twinbrook Forest residents raised almost identical concerns, the County has termed those concerns irrelevant.

Project approval in Rockville now rests with the City's Planning Commission. If the Commission approves on March 12, residents have little hope of persuading the County Council to reverse its

support for this project. Should Rockville's Planning Commission disapprove, the project must go to the County Council for an open vote.

City officials seem to be confused about the approval process. On February 24, the Mayor's support specialist wrote to a resident stating, "email will be part of the public record." Less than two days later, Bobby Ray, one of Rockville's principal planners, wrote to a different resident stating, "this is not a public hearing so there is no official record" in reference to the March 12 Planning Commission meeting.

Residents who have sent emails and letters to the Mayor and Council have not been assured that elected officials have actually seen their communications. Concerns that I shared by email with Mayor Newton on January 15, 2014, including a request for the notification list, have not been addressed. Residents are organizing against the project. Mr. Richard Gottfried personally paid for 100 signs for opponents of the project to put in their yards.

"I felt it was important to get the word out at any cost, since the County shared virtually no information about the project with the neighborhood before deciding to go ahead," said Mr. Gottfried. "Also, we all know that if the County had proposed to put an office building on Julius West Middle School, that idea would never have made it out of the County Executive's office."

Mr. Max Van Balgooy, a former Rockville Historic District Commissioner who was moved to start a neighborhood blog (www.twinbrookparkway.com) about the CRC project, concurred that there were transparency problems with the County officials. "My confidence in the County's honesty and transparency diminished with each passing minute. Each time the County representative said 'We would never do anything to harm the neighborhood' I grew increasingly cautious and felt like I was being sold a used car or patted on the head. . . I kept feeling that they were intentionally withholding information."

Documents prepared by Rockville City staff for the Mayor and Council's March 3, 2013 meeting indicate an evolving vision. On November 14th, 2013, Rockville Mayor Bridget Newton testified before the Board of Education that "it is equally important that there be no delays in the County's construction of a new Childrens Resource Center on the Broome School site."

However, the Mayor may be cooling on the project. In an email dated February 21, Mayor Newton stated "I believe that there is a better solution than spending \$14 million and building an office addition in a neighborhood."

County Executive candidate Doug Duncan has also weighed in. According to an email dated February 26, Mr. Duncan said, "I wish there was something I could do now about the office building being built at Broome, but it will have to wait until I am back in office...I wish you the best and promise that I will review this quickly once I am back in office."

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 the montgomerycivic@yahoo.com