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MCCF Delegates Oppose Sale of Peary High School: Background and Implications

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

At the September 12 MCCF meeting, the following emergency resolution was brought forward by the Education Committee, discussed, and passed unanimously:

The Civic Federation recommends that the request of the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy to purchase the Peary High School property be denied and that the existing lease be continued.

The delegates were provided the following background to inform their discussion:

“Peary HS (in the Aspen Hill region of the County) was declared surplus (by MCPS) in the mid 1980s and turned over to the County. The property was not adequately maintained and fell into serious disrepair, resulting in considerable upset in the surrounding community.

"In the mid 1990s, the Hebrew Academy (HA) entered into a lease agreement by which they occupied the facility, paying a modest annual fee (\$60,000) and spent about \$10 million restoring and upgrading the facility. The terms of the lease (which extends until 2023) specify that the HA can offer to buy the facility at any time, at which point the County Executive and County Council must determine if the sale shall proceed and the terms of such sale.

"The County Executive has recommended that the sale be allowed, subject to several restrictions. M-NC/PPC is to offer its opinion later this week. The Council's MFP Committee will hold a hearing on the matter on September 19 and will render a decision. The Aspen Hill community appears to be in strong support of the sale because, prior to the takeover by the HA, the Peary site was a serious problem for the community. Thereafter the HA 'saved' the facility and is perceived as a very valuable 'good neighbor'. Furthermore the community believes that MCPS and the County will never use Peary for any education-related purposes.

“The MCCF Education Committee has researched this issue, including extensive readings, discussions with MCCPTA representatives, and some contact with the Aspen Hill CA (via its president). While MCPS and the County continue to state that there is no need for the Peary site, we view the "loss" of the site as part of the problem of diminishing site capacity that MCCF has been arguing with MCPS for some time.

"While the proposed sale would stipulate that the County could buy back the site in 2026 (or thereafter) at then-current market value, the cost by that time would be extremely unfavorable to the County, while the proposed sale price at this time appears to be too low by a considerable amount. Land for any future high schools that might be needed in the downcounty area is essentially non-existent. There is no compelling reason why the

HA cannot continue to lease the facility and why, when the current lease expires, it would not be possible to draft a new lease, perhaps with better financial terms for HA, with a number of shorter, staged, buy-back windows.

"The MCCF Education Committee recognizes the benefits that the HA has produced for the Aspen Hill community and the service they have rendered to the County by their good stewardship of the Peary site. But the HA has also derived considerable benefit from the existing lease arrangement and would continue to benefit if the lease continues. Montgomery County stands to gain little if anything from a sale at this time and stands to lose an extremely valuable site that might be one of the only possible down-county parcels that could serve for either a newly needed high school or a holding school to be used while existing high schools are being modernized."

There was considerable additional information covered in the delegates' discussion, some of which was included in a subsequent Civic Federation Corner article in the Montgomery County Sentinel (September 22). M-NC/PPC staff also recommended against the sale, with arguments largely in agreement with those of the MCCF Education Committee. On September 15, the Planning Board voted to approve the recommendation of Planning Staff. County Council (MFP) action (originally scheduled for September 19, hence the need for the emergency resolution) has since been deferred until October 17.

While the Peary site disposition is still not resolved, it is perhaps instructive to consider the issues it re-emphasizes for the Civic Federation.

First is the continuing failure of the Board of Education and various components of county government to respect citizens' concerns about the inappropriate disposition of parcels owned by MCPS (or the County), that may very well be needed for school facilities in the future.

Second is the manner in which such decisions often pit one element of the community against another; in this case it forced MCCF delegates to take the position of opposing the wishes of one of its member organizations. In other situations local PTAs have been pitted against one another.

Thirdly, volunteer organizations, like the Civic Federation (or PTAs), are often not aware of such proposed actions until very near critical deadlines and are often forced to act extremely rapidly, sometimes without all necessary information. In this case, I am confident that MCCF has acted appropriately (in addition to the decision of M-NC/PPC, the MCCPTA has expressed its opposition to the sale of Peary), but our mechanisms for dealing with such issues are stretched quite thin.

Government agencies must be made to see the value of proactively involving the broader community in such decisions, rather than acting in a manner that, to many of us, appears to be an effort to "sneak things by the community". Given the enormous number of actions being considered at any given time, citizens cannot be expected to track all of them (not even all those mentioned in the media), but we can demand that agencies

directly inform groups, such as MCCF and MCCPTA, of upcoming actions in which groups such as ours could reasonably be expected to have an interest.

Given the current state of affairs, the Civic Federation urgently needs more member associations, and more of its delegates need to inform the various Federation committees of "looming" problems. And, speaking for the Education Committee, I repeat my request for more citizens to become active in our committee work. We are, for a small group, rather effective; imagine how much more could be done if a few more good people would join the effort!