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## School Board Criticized in Building Deal

Montgomery System Misled Public on Seven Locks Project, Draft Audit Says

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The Montgomery County school system misled the public two years ago when it proposed tearing down Seven Locks Elementary School and rebuilding it on another site, according to a county inspector general's report.

In 2004, the County Council agreed with the school board and Superintendent Jerry D. Weast to relocate the aging school, a move that system officials said was cheaper than adding onto and renovating the building at Seven Locks Road in Bethesda.

The council approved a plan to spend \$14 million to build the replacement school on Kendale Road about 1 1/2 miles away. Some residents have long suspected that the real motivation was to sell the prime Seven Locks lot to developers. At the time, Weast and County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) were considering using the property to increase the county's supply of affordable housing.

Inspector General Thomas Dagley, whose report will be released today, said the school system presented incomplete cost-benefit numbers to the County Council. He also said the school system misrepresented the extent of public support, ignored a cheaper option and awarded a no-bid architectural contract worth \$817,014.

Dagley, who is charged with investigating waste and fraud in county government, declined to comment until his report is officially released. A draft of his report, obtained by The Washington Post, outlines a series of possible missteps that call into question how school officials handled the project.

Weast was out ill yesterday and unavailable to comment on the report, according to the school system. But other school officials dismissed Dagley's audit, saying it is flawed. They also challenged the inspector general's authority to investigate how the school board makes decisions.

"I do not believe it was appropriate for you to decide unilaterally to resolve these complaints," school board member Stephen N. Abrams (Rockville-Potomac), citing legal precedence, wrote to Dagley last week in a letter responding to a draft copy of the document.

Several County Council members are calling for further investigation, saying Dagley's findings raise broad questions about how the school system manages its \$1.8 billion annual budget.

"It makes you wonder what else is out there," said council member Howard A. Denis

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Dagley's report contends that the school system selectively used data to conclude that it was too expensive to renovate the existing school building.

And when school officials presented two options to the council -- adding to the existing building or rebuilding the school on Kendale Road -- they said the county would save \$3 million by moving the school.

Dagley said school officials did not provide to the council information about a third, less-costly option: demolishing the existing building and then rebuilding on the same site. That would have been about \$150,000 cheaper than moving the school, Dagley wrote.

"We think the Seven Locks case really constitutes a poster child for a lack of accountability in the school system," said Sandy Vogelgesang, a member of the Save Seven Locks Schools Coalition, a neighborhood group that pushed for expanding the current site.

School system officials say that containing costs was not the only issue. Also of concern was the best way to relieve crowding at Seven Locks, said Larry Bowers, chief operating officer for Montgomery County schools.

Council member Michael L. Subin (D-At large), chairman of the council's education committee, agreed. He called Dagley's audit "a very poor document" that "looks at dollars" but not broader public policy questions about how best to ease school crowding.

Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) sent a memo to his colleagues yesterday calling for hearings on the audit. He warned in the memo that school officials would be violating county law if they did not cooperate with Dagley.

According to Dagley's report, Weast wasn't forthright when he told the school board and other county officials that the community supported building a school on a new site.

Weast sent a memo to the school board last February saying that the Seven Locks Elementary School Parent-Teacher Association "proposed a plan to build a replacement" school on Kendale Road. Dagley's report concludes that wasn't true -- a claim backed up yesterday by Harlivleen Gill, president of the Seven Locks Elementary School PTA, in an interview with the Post.

Dagley also questions whether the school system violated requirements designed to ensure competitive bids.

The \$817,000 contract went to Walton Madden Cooper Robinson Pones Inc., a Landover-based firm.

School officials said they didn't need to bid the project because they advertise annually for "architectural services, not specific projects," according to comments that attorneys for the school board submitted to Dagley during his investigation.

Bowers said the school system would reevaluate its bidding practices.

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