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School Decisions Divide Officials In Montgomery

Council, Board in Tug of War Over Spending

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The Montgomery County Board of Education is locked in an increasingly bitter power struggle with County Council members seeking additional oversight of the school system's multibillion-dollar budget.

In the wake of an inspector general's report that accused the board and Superintendent Jerry D. Weast of misleading the public over the proposed relocation of Seven Locks Elementary School, some council members are calling for more transparency on school system spending.

Many council members say they are not even sure what's in the school system's budget, which includes \$1.7 billion for annual operating expenses and a five-year, \$1.2 billion plan for building and renovating schools.

"What the [inspector general's] report says is they are not providing us the whole picture," said County Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large).

Some school board members have accused council members of orchestrating a "power grab" designed to boost their own political fortunes while undermining the education of 140,000 students.

Sharon W. Cox (D-At Large), the board's vice president, said in an interview that the council is trying to seize control of the school budget so it can divide it up as it does with pork-barrel projects.

"This issue of accountability is a cover for an excuse to usurp the nonpartisan school board and turn school facilities into political favors," Cox said.

Montgomery's school system receives 75 percent of its funding from the county. The nine-member council broadly appropriates county money to the independently elected school board, which then makes specific spending decisions.

In 2004, the council agreed to a request from the school board and Weast to relocate the aging Seven Locks Elementary to help ease crowding at nearby Potomac Elementary. System officials said that move would be cheaper than adding onto and renovating the existing 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.

The council is scheduled to hold a hearing tonight on the school board's request for an additional \$3.3 million to complete the project. But council member Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac-Bethesda), citing community

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opposition, wants to kill the plan so the school can be rebuilt on its existing site. Denis said the school board's decision to move the school was based on incomplete and misleading information.

School board member Stephen N. Abrams (Rockville-Potomac) said the council wants "to take the place of the Board of Education."

For years, the council, Weast and the school board have had a comfortable relationship. Council members, mindful of residents' desire for a top-ranked school system, have been quick to approve most of the board's budget requests in recent years, including a 65 percent increase in school funding since Weast became superintendent in 1999.

The money has gone toward reducing class sizes, updating the curriculum and modernizing schools. Montgomery public schools are considered among the best in the nation.

But Inspector General Thomas Dagley's report on the school system's handling of the Seven Locks project has emboldened some council members to challenge school officials on spending. Council members hired two analysts last year whose job, in part, is to examine how the schools spend money, and they say they want greater scrutiny of budget requests and spending decisions on previously approved funds.

Some council members said they also plan to be more skeptical of their colleague Michael L. Subin (D-At Large), who chairs the Education Committee and has worked closely with Weast over the years on school funding decisions.

"It is not possible for one council member or one committee to do the amount of oversight that is necessary," said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville).

At least two school board members, Valerie Ervin (Silver Spring) and Nancy Navarro (Northeastern County), agree that the council should have more oversight. They accuse Weast and other board members of making decisions without consulting the full board.

In his report, Dagley concluded that the school system misled the public when it said it was more cost-effective to build the school on Kendale Road.

Dagley, whose job it is to investigate suspected waste and fraud in county government, said the school system presented incomplete cost-benefit numbers to the council. He also said the school system misrepresented the extent of public support and ignored a cheaper option: rebuilding the school on the existing Seven Locks Road site.

"We don't withhold information, we just don't necessarily provide it" unless asked, Richard Hawes, director of the school system's Department of Facilities Management, told the council at a hearing Thursday.

Some board members have responded to Dagley's investigation by questioning his competence, saying his report was incomplete because it failed to take into account the entire scope of the project.

Cox told the council last week that the Kendale site was selected because Seven Locks Road is plagued by traffic congestion. Construction at the Kendale site also could be completed a year earlier, fulfilling previous council predictions on how fast some schools should be modernized, she said.

Abrams charged that Dagley is "in over his head" and doesn't have "a clue of the complexity of the decision-making process." School officials have said they do not have to cooperate with Dagley because the school system is a state agency.

Abrams accused the council and Dagley of running "a kangaroo court."

"If he thinks that was a kangaroo court, he's in the wrong zoo," responded Council Vice President Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County).

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