

Seven Locks decision moves to the council

At risk is a \$3.3 million appropriation to cover cost increases at the Kendale site

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by Sean R. Sedam
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Where Seven Locks Elementary School is rebuilt could depend on whether the County Council approves a \$3.3 million supplemental appropriation to keep the project moving ahead in Potomac, the county school board president said Tuesday.

The council planned to hold a public hearing Tuesday after The Gazette's deadline on the supplemental appropriation, which would cover cost increases on plans to build a new school on Kendale Road.

"If they reject that supplemental I do not know how we can proceed," said board President Charles Haughey (At large) of Rockville. "But at best it's going to be very tight and very difficult to proceed."

County Council President George L. Leventhal said the way the project has been handled represents a "breakdown in the system" that has forced the council to review different options for the project.

"The choice is now in the hands of the County Council, unfortunately," Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said Monday.

A meeting of the council's Education and Management and Fiscal Policy committees last week demonstrated how deep the rift is between the council and the school board.

Both council and school board members said Thursday's meeting was more remarkable for its subtext than for the questioning Inspector General Thomas J. Dagley received on his report that charged the school system with not presenting all available options for the Potomac school.

That subtext involves the council's relationship with the school board, which receives about 75 percent of its budget from the county, said board member Stephen N. Abrams (Dist. 2) of Rockville.

"It's clear that there are multiple agendas going on here," he said Tuesday. "It's clear there are some members of the County Council that are after [Education Committee Chairman Michael L.] Subin. It's clear that Howie Denis has a constituency problem. And it's clear that Mr. Leventhal is involved in a power grab."

Sharon W. Cox, who was president of the board in 2004 when it decided to build a new Seven Locks on Kendale Road, agreed.

"The biggest outcome of the IG's report that council members pounced on was they weren't getting enough info to micromanage the Board of Education," said Cox (At large) of Germantown, who did most of the speaking on behalf of the school system at Thursday's meeting.

Leventhal said the council has been forced to ask tough questions that board members are not willing to ask.

“I’m not sure who’s running the place,” he said of the school system. “Two representative members of the board, from this experience Sharon Cox and Steve Abrams, are seeking to expand their influence and to speak on behalf of the school system. I’d like to know who’s in charge.”

Board members Nancy Navarro and Valerie Ervin (Dist. 4) of Silver Spring said they have been kept out of discussions on the school system’s responses to the audit.

Navarro (Dist. 5) of Silver Spring said she did not see a statement that Cox presented on behalf of the board before Cox read it on Thursday.

“I really don’t appreciate my name implied with a statement where I haven’t seen it and I’ve never been consulted on it,” she said.

Board officers frequently present statements to the council without full board review, Cox and Abrams said.

The board could discuss the report at its March 14 meeting, Cox said.

Subin (D-At large) of Gaithersburg called last week’s meeting “a waste of time.”

“As far as I’m concerned the IG had absolutely nothing to offer,” Subin said. “He was critical that this information was not presented when decisions were made. The answer that the school board and school system and I all gave is that that information is irrelevant. A policy has been in place since 1989 that those were not options.”

That policy froze the modernization list, not allowing projects to jump their place in line.

School planners do not provide the council with every cost option for every project, Richard G. Hawes, the school system’s facilities director, told the council committees.

“So the school system decides what it thinks is best and provides the council with options that back up its position?” Leventhal asked.

“That is correct,” Hawes said, adding that the school system will provide additional cost options if asked.

The Potomac Elementary School PTA voted Monday to support rebuilding Seven Locks on its current site, although the option would mean delaying relief to the crowded Potomac Elementary. Potomac Elementary, which is about 80 students over capacity, would see some relief with the opening of a new Seven Locks.

“That’s their call at this stage,” Abrams said Tuesday. “That was not their position before.”

Staff Writer Peggy Vaughn contributed to this report.