

June 2, 2004

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Montgomery County Council
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SUBJECT: Public Participation in Kendale and Seven Locks Decisions

Dear Council President Silverman:

This letter is to register the strong concern of the citizens' associations in the area served by the Seven Locks Elementary School about the recent decision to close that school and build a new, large school on Kendale Road. We explain our concern about the substance and process of that decision, suggest meetings with School Board and County Council officials and staff, and ask that public hearings be held before further action is taken.

Members of our community have expressed serious concerns regarding the lack of public involvement in the decisions leading to the recently announced plans for a new elementary school on Kendale Road and/or the closing and likely surplus of Seven Locks Elementary School. They do not believe that suddenly reversing a process underway for several years makes sense, based on the information publicly available. Seven Locks Elementary School students, parents, and staff, the Seven Locks and Bradley Boulevard communities, and the Kendale Road neighborhood constitute thousands of citizens in Montgomery County who want, and we think deserve, to be heard. As you have seen, they are beginning to write letters, send e-mails, and take action.

We know that finding solutions to challenging situations is not easy and that there are always trade-offs. However, with the constantly evolving plans, diverse and sometimes contradictory statements made by public officials, and lack of a consistent story being told among MCPS / Board of Education / County Council, it is extremely difficult for citizens to understand what is occurring. Lack of clarity and transparency breeds discontent and rising concern.

We believe an open and comprehensive dialogue with clear and consistent information is essential for citizens, parents, the County Council, the Board of Education, the MCPS, and our students.

Was Community Input Allowed?

Members of the community at large do not think their input has been sought or considered.

On February 23, in his recommendation on the “County’s Request to Surplus the Brickyard Road, Kendale Road, and Edson Lane Properties,” Superintendent Weast stated “...I believe the community would support the plan to surplus the Seven Lock site.” During the work session of the Education Subcommittee on May 6, in response to a query from Council Member Denis about transparency and community input, both Mrs. Cox and Superintendent Weast insisted that there had been community input regarding this issue and implied that their new plan to surplus Seven Locks Elementary and build Kendale was in response to a community request for that action. What specific community input are they referring to? There has been no effort by the Board of Education (or the MCPS) to contact the community associations. To our knowledge there is unanimity of civic associations representing over 2,000 homes as well as PTAs throughout the Churchill Cluster against surplus of Brickyard Road, Kendale Road, and Edson Lane Properties. At the only public Board of Education hearing, dealing with surplus of the three properties, the public testimony and sentiment were overwhelming against the course of action proposed by Superintendent Weast and the MCPS.

Because Dr. Weast and Mrs. Cox contend that there has been sufficient public input specifically about the Kendale School and the surplus of the Seven Locks Elementary site, it would clarify matters if they were to list the dates, times, number and type of attendees, and the nature of such discussions that they have held with the community.

We did have had a meeting with Councilmember Denis, his key education staff member, and education staff of some other council members on May 12, and appreciated that opportunity to start a dialogue with the County Council.

Basis for Decision-Making

Questions have been raised regarding the basis for decision-making of the Board of Education and the County Council. Following are some examples where there seem to be inconsistent statements by County officials.

1) Is Seven Locks Elementary School a safe site?

One County Council member said on May 13 that the current location is a horrible site for a school. Yet, the November 2003 CIP includes the Board of Education plan for a \$20 million dollar renovation and expansion of Seven Locks Elementary at its current site. Were Superintendent Weast and the Board of Education wrong in thinking Seven Locks Elementary School should be expanded? Or, is Seven Locks Elementary, which has been operating for almost 40 years, an acceptable school site? Why did a feasibility study outline plans for the SLES expansion/modernization if that site was not acceptable for a school? Why did MCPS commission a traffic study in 2004 that documented traffic relief at the Bradley/Seven Locks intersection if the site was not acceptable for a school?

2) Is there money to build a new school or for a contemporaneous addition/modernization at Seven Locks?

The Seven Locks PTA was told it was not possible to do an addition/modernization in one step at the same time, and that it had to be done in at least two steps, in part due to budget limitations. Yet, the most recent plan is to budget enough money to build a new school at Kendale in one step. If there is now money and will to construct an improved elementary school in one step (a new development), then it is important to consider formally a one-step modernization/addition at Seven Locks site— which would be less expensive than the previously proposed MCPS original multi-step plan— and get PTA *and* community input on that option. Asking parents to make decisions based on one set of ground rules (i.e., not possible for single step addition/modernization), and then changing ground rules for the next plan raises ethical concerns.

3) Will the Kendale school be built to allow over 700 students or be built for 500 or less students, and will the community input be considered?

On May 13, the President of the Board of Education and the MCPS Superintendent affirmed that the community would have meaningful input into the planning and design for this proposed new Kendale facility. Yet, on May 6, the MCPS staff who talked to the Education Subcommittee used the opposite rationale for proof that this plan was economical— promising that there would not be any need for design because they would use plans from existing schools in order to keep the costs down. How do the Board of Education and MCPS solicit community involvement in the building of new schools or in making changes to existing ones?

There are also concerns about site expenses in connection with the possible MCPS school on Kendale Road, such as environment, safety utilities, and flooding. These factors have not been seriously assessed in terms of either cost or impact. One of the main stated advantages of the Kendale School is its supposed cost savings. In light of lean budgetary times, it would be highly irresponsible to county taxpayers not to account for, up front, all of the attendant costs of this project.

(4) What is meant by the MOU, and does the Board of Education plan to sell, or barter, or give away the Seven Locks School property (if after public input all parties agree a new school should be built on Kendale)?

We are confused as to the use of "surplus" property. We have heard that the Superintendent of Schools wanted to use the MCPS property for teacher housing. We did not realize the Superintendent or the Board of Education could decide how to use MCPS property for non-educational purposes, particularly if it were declared surplus. We have been told that members of the Board of Education have been telling diverse groups of parents that a variety of programs and school expansions could not be done unless they surplused Seven Locks/Kendale. We wonder what promises have been made and the basis for them.

We have contacted the County Council and MCPS regarding the Memorandum of Understanding, and no one claims to know who is doing it or what the scope will be. Because, in the past few months, the unknown has quickly changed to formal Board of Education and County Council action, clarity on this issue would be appreciated.

(5) Does the Board of Education plan on surplus (or establishing MOU or other mechanism to obtain value) any MCPS properties over their five- year planning horizon, and, if so, how many and where?

A year ago there was not any known public discussion on surplus MCPS property. Has there been a change in demographics in the last year showing school populations are now going down? If other non-education factors are now being considered, the community is interested in what non-education criteria have now become more important to the Board of Education than planning to assure land is available for future educational needs. Also, if the Board of Education has now taken on a financing role for MCPS, and now feels responsible for raising funds by selling (or setting up MOUs to obtain value from) its MCPS properties, the community would be interesting in knowing the basis and scope of that new charter.

(6) Will Tuckerman School be used by MCPS? Is MCPS planning to build additional schools in the western part of Potomac to handle the growth there?

The Superintendent of Schools indicated that, if needed, the Tuckerman Elementary School, which is currently being leased to a private school, could be used by MCPS. If that is true, then the overflow of students at Potomac Elementary School could be accommodated at Tuckerman School immediately, and the money saved could be used elsewhere in the County where needs are greater than in the Bethesda-Potomac area. If the Tuckerman School is not available, why does the Superintendent consider that a factor in his planning? The overflow at Potomac Elementary has been driven by growth occurring in the north and west of the Potomac area. This growth is continuing. Will it be met with school construction located in those areas?

Possible Next Steps to Allow Community Involvement

As you can see from this letter, citizens in the communities served by Seven Locks Elementary School are frustrated, confused and unclear about Board of Education, MCPS and County Council actions and policies. Stating these positions clearly and publicly and answering questions from the community would help address and reduce community concern.

In conclusion, we call upon the Board of Education to hold public hearings on all aspects of the Seven Locks/Kendale project. The issues of fairness and sound public policy mandate that all affected communities be involved in the decisions that affect all of us as parents of schoolchildren, as neighborhood residents, and as taxpayers. Until we have the opportunity to understand the rationale for the sudden change in plans by the County, we continue to oppose the closing of Seven Locks Elementary School and the building of a new school on Kendale Road as it is currently configured. We respectfully request the holding of any funds for this project until the community, together with our County representatives, can determine the best way to meet student needs – both for our neighborhood and elsewhere in the County.

We look forward to meeting with you on these issues and to the convening of public hearings.

Our addresses and home phones are provided below so that you or your staffs can contact us.

Sincerely,

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