

Testimony to Board of Education on Superintendent's Recommended CIP -
11/11/04

I'm Wayne Goldstein, First Vice President of the Montgomery County Civic Federation. If the Board of Education and School Superintendent Weast are analogous to a neighborhood shop owner then, in the context of surplus school sites, the County Council and County Executive Duncan are comparable to the neighborhood crime organization that extracts "protection" money from local merchants. In this instance, it appears that the county legislators and executive are threatening to withhold school funding if the school system does not begin to give away its land for infill development.

Last March, I told you that the County Executive was trying to make you responsible for his failure to stop MPDU buyouts by trying to extract various school sites from you. This information seemed to cause you to back away from complying with that demand. Unfortunately, you have once again succumbed to this political pressure, so, once again, I will try to stiffen your resolve to oppose this protection racket, this political blackmail.

You are in need of a holding high school today because of the failure of your predecessors in the '70s and '80s to retain, maintain, and reclaim Peary High School. After the traumatic fights over which schools to close were ended, closed schools such as Peary ended up being sold off as derelict structures to be used by others. Thanks only to the dogged 20-year fight by the Wheaton Cluster community, Belt Middle School was eventually reclaimed at great cost.

In the '90s, the previous superintendent did not ask for much of what was needed so as not to "embarrass" certain County Council members. Dr. Weast showed both political acumen and courage in first asking for Belt and then for the huge sums needed to begin catch up after a decade of using portable classrooms as an unofficial substitute for bricks and mortar.

Now, you are being pressured to make the same kinds of bad decisions that your predecessors made 10, 20, and 30 years ago, and this will result in comparable difficulties for your successors 10, 20 and 30 years from now. There are many schools made up of multiple parcels, many given to you for school use, including the Edson Road site. Expedient county officials have cherry-picked Edson Road and Brickyard Road and other seemingly-surplus sites for the first round of extortion for affordable housing.

Given the County Executive's recent promise to build 1000 affordable housing units in the next 4 years, after this first round of supposedly just removing some fat from the body education is completed, future rounds will be demanded to remove what will then be muscle and even bone from which recovery will not be possible. After the shop keeper makes his first payment to protect his store from broken windows or arson, future payments will eventually cripple his ability to thrive and even survive.

I and many of my civic colleagues are at your service to defend you from any further blackmail or retribution from the syndicate operating out of downtown Rockville.

When you rebuff them, tell them that the 1000 affordable units can be largely satisfied by retrieving some of the 8000 MPDUs lost to the market when ridiculously short control periods were enacted by short-sighted public officials in the '70s and '80s. This repurchase can be financed with new money generated by a relatively modest affordable housing impact fee levied on the million dollar starter mansions being built in large quantities but in small groups that are not required to provide any MPDUs.

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