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## Seven Locks School Debate Confirms 'Worst Fears'

By Wayne Goldstein  
Thursday, March 23, 2006; GZ04

*The Montgomery County school system, under pressure from the County Council and civic activists, agreed recently to reconsider its proposal to tear down and relocate Seven Locks Elementary School in Bethesda. Last month, a report by the county's inspector general accused the school system of misleading the public when officials said it was cheaper to move the school from Seven Locks Road to nearby Kendale Road than to rebuild on the existing site, with the goal of reducing overcrowding at Potomac Elementary.*

*A majority of the council said they would vote to block the \$17 million project, and some called for greater oversight of the school system. School officials agreed to appoint a task force to study where and how a replacement school should be built.*

*Wayne Goldstein, first vice president of the Montgomery County Civic Federation and a member of its Education Committee, has been actively involved in the issue for several years. Goldstein, 53, a landscape contractor who lives in Kensington, writes about his views on how the situation has been handled.*

After two years' worth of very strange doings by our county's school system concerning Seven Locks Elementary School, an objective audit and analysis of the process by the county's inspector general has confirmed the worst fears of knowledgeable education and civic activists.

There are grave new concerns about the school system's credibility, due to the initially ferocious and bizarre response by a majority of the Board of Education and by many high-ranking school officials, all of whom attacked the methods and conclusions of the inspector general's report as well as the character and motives of the inspector general and others. Board members Steve Abrams and Sharon Cox continue to defiantly challenge the authority of the inspector general to research and write this or any school report without the express permission of the school board.

The most serious item in the inspector general's report is that Montgomery County public schools did not share the cost data on building a new Seven Locks school on the current site, even though it researched and updated that option. Richard Hawes, MCPS facilities director, responded to questions about this glaring omission with: "We don't withhold information, we just don't necessarily provide it" unless asked. However, I and others asked him for it, and none of us was provided with the cost data.

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Any lingering doubts about the extent of community support for building the new Seven Locks school on the Kendale Road site were extinguished when the Potomac Elementary School PTA spoke in unified opposition to that option at a County Council hearing on March 7. Although all participating education officials were extraordinarily combative at that hearing and at a joint council committee work session on March 2, most soon became surprisingly open to a joint task force made up of council and school staff that would look at other options.

It is hoped that the task force will recommend a comprehensive plan for the Churchill cluster's five elementary schools, all of which are at or above capacity and were either built or renovated 30 to 42 years ago.

Why have actions related to just one of the county's 125 elementary schools done so much to undermine the credibility of our school system?

After the county executive requested certain unused school sites for affordable housing in fall 2003, Superintendent Jerry Weast instead concocted an alternate scheme in February 2004 to build a new elementary school on the Kendale Road site, paying for it by selling the current Seven Locks school to a developer for housing. Even when Weast abandoned the strange idea of trying to get cash for school land -- in the face of massive opposition -- and even when the school board said it would never surplus Seven Locks, the plan to build on Kendale assumed a life of its own, and school officials remained determined to do this project, apparently no matter what the consequences.

One of the worst incidents to come out of this occurred when three top MCPS officials signed detailed affidavits last month stating that at a specific meeting in January 2004, a cluster coordinator indicated support for the Kendale Road site. This extraordinary effort to point the finger at one solitary volunteer parent came in response to the third finding in the inspector general's report: "Evidence does not support MCPS statements to the [school board] that the [Seven Locks] community proposed or supported a Kendale replacement school option." This no-holds-barred action will surely chill parental involvement in the future if apologies and promises by MCPS to never do this again are not made.

Other concerns remain: 1) the lack of outside examination of many MCPS activities; 2) the failure of the school board and MCPS to respond to community newspaper stories about delayed and underreporting of incidents of school violence; 3) whether the superintendent and certain board members use closed meeting sessions to discuss what is supposed to be discussed in public sessions; and 4) a blurring of the lines of authority between the superintendent and the board.

Board member Cox has characterized the County Council's needed oversight on Seven Locks as a "power grab." Unless school officials acknowledge and correct the mistakes they've made in their version of the Clarksburg [development issue] and take significant steps to restore public confidence, such oversight may have to increase.

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