

What is Driving Kendale Plan?

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At last week's Montgomery County Council work session a plan was introduced to the full council to "supersize" a local elementary school.

Montgomery County Board of Education's Policy on Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning says that the "preferred range of enrollment" for an elementary school is: "two to four classes per grade." In calculating school capacity, each classroom is to hold 25 students.

That would make the preferred range of enrollment for an elementary school from 294 to 544 students (these numbers include two sections of kindergarten at 22 students each). Eighty-two Montgomery County elementary schools currently operate within this preferred range of enrollment.

The plan for the new Seven Locks Elementary school is to move the facility to the vacant Kendale Elementary school site and "supersize" the facility to enable it to accommodate up to 740 students.

As part of the Council's presentation of this plan a chart detailed how the building of this "supersize" elementary school will eliminate any future overcrowding in the Churchill cluster elementary schools through the year 2020.

This was not the plan presented by Dr. Weast to the Board of Education on March 22. In that plan, Dr. Weast proposed moving the Seven Locks Elementary school to the new site at a cost of \$13.7 million in capital funds.

Those funds would build an elementary school, as was contemplated for the Seven Locks corner location, with a capacity of 550 students. The new plan by the County Council is to "supersize" the facility at a now total cost of \$14.7 million.

What does the Council get for this plan? They get to push the school system to declare the site of the current Seven Locks Elementary surplus. Land that the Council can then dispose of in a number of ways.

How does the community feel about this proposal? That is an unanswered question. There has been no opportunity for input on this proposal. On March 3, a hearing was held to discuss whether or not the Kendale site should be surplus. At that time there was no information available to the community as to the potential for moving the location of the elementary school and tripling its size.

The Seven Locks Elementary school community has been in the process of planning for a modernized facility at their present location for three years. During that time, the community was not aware of a vacant 10.54 acre parcel down the road. What was a three year process has now been condensed down to a 10 day process as community members scramble to gather information and evaluate the proposal.

Community input is something that is part of our democratic process and should not be overlooked. In this situation, community input brought down the cost of the Seven Locks Elementary school replacement project from the original \$20.1 million, three phase construction - as proposed by MCPS last year, to the cost of a new school on a vacant site at \$13.7 million.

The County Council now seeks to increase that cost in order to make the Seven Locks corner available to be declared surplus.

If a new school were built at the Kendale location would the current Seven Locks Elementary school be needed in the future? This remains an unanswered question as many housing units are being constructed in the area. Certainly if elementary schools are to stay within Board of Education guidelines the facility could be put to use. The Churchill Cluster currently has 19 classroom trailers on the ground at the elementary school level. There are enough children in the Churchill Cluster to make use of the current Seven Locks site and a new facility.

In the alternative, the Seven Locks site could be used to house MCPS offices that are now in leased commercial buildings around the county. The fields behind the school could continue to be rented out for community use. Under Board of Education Policy DNA, the Board of Education can declare a property surplus when it "is considered to have no further use for school system purposes." Possible uses for this site within the school system have only begun to be explored.

There is one component of these issues that has received very little consideration. That is the children. Where are they in these discussions? Board of Education policies speak to what is educationally sound for our children but those are only paper documents. The elected officials who are making these decisions seem to have forgotten the "end user" of these facilities. Is it in the best interest of children in Montgomery County Public Schools to be educated in facilities with over 700 students? Where is the research and the evidence that this is a "best practice" for the education of our present and future generations?