

"We're continually open to the input process..."

-- Superintendent Jerry Weast, May 13, 2004

The Seven Locks replacement school slated for construction on Kendale Road is planned to be huge -- big enough to deal with the Potomac and Wayside Elementary overcrowding (according to the Superintendent on May 13, 2004). Superintendent Weast was mistaken in his impression that Kendale and Seven Locks are equal 10-acre sites: Kendale's usable acreage is considerably smaller, due to its topography and location adjacent to a flood plain. Our road is hilly, curvy, narrow with no shoulders for parking, and very dangerous due to excessive speeding. Fitting a school nearly triple the size originally intended for our site poses enormous challenges and will dramatically change the very nature of our neighborhood. We are also very concerned that MCPS has estimated the project to be so inexpensive. Our concerns are to be addressed in a series of Facilities Advisory Committee (FAC) meetings held between community members, MCPS teachers and staff, and expert consultants.

Ken Millstone's 1/12/05 article, "It's a Nice School, But Don't Build It" outlined community members' anger about the planned closing of Seven Locks Elementary School as it was expressed at the 1/6/05 FAC meeting. Robin Gordon, the principal at Seven Locks, did a heroic job of trying to refocus the meeting in the face of such anger on the part of so many. Staff representatives from MCPS emphatically explained that the FAC meeting was not the proper forum to address whether or not the replacement school would be built. They also assured the frustrated audience that there would be a future opportunity to address that issue.

However, on May 13, 2004, Superintendent Weast and then Board of Education President Cox stated on the record to the County Council that the Seven Locks community not only had already provided input, but that the replacement school had actually been the Seven Locks community's idea. The Superintendent stated: "We did get plenty of input because this issue with Seven Locks actually was brought to us in our input from the general public because we were forging ahead with doing classrooms at Seven Locks... But with the input we got from the public, who pointed out that Kendale had 10 acres and Seven Locks had 10 acres, we actually re-examined our position." And Mrs. Cox elaborated further: "We have already had one public hearing on the concept of building the school on the Kendale site and it was in March along with our boundaries discussion and the Superintendent's recommendation to build the replacement school on the Kendale site was a subject of this public hearing. We did get testimony from the schools involved so there really already has been a public hearing on the concept of the replacement building."

Yet at that time, hardly anyone in the community, outside a handful of people in the Seven Locks PTA, had any idea that there was a possibility that Seven Locks Elementary School would be closed and a huge new school built on Kendale. No member of the community was notified by mail of any such plan or possibility.

The County Council also made very clear on May 13, 2004 what the replacement school would mean for Seven Locks. In opening discussion of the issue, Councilmember Subin stated: "Seven Locks is a horrible, horrible site for a school... The Board of Education and the Superintendent came to an overdue conclusion that they would prefer to build a new school of the site of the Kendale property and surplus to the County the Seven Locks site." As the discussion came to a conclusion, Councilmember Praisner reminded the Superintendent and Board of Education President of the implications of their actions: "The regulations would require if this [Seven Locks] parcel, if the site, if the building is no longer needed by the school system that it is conveyed then to the County Council. And folks need to understand the process. It isn't a sale of the parcel; it is a conveyance... Once there is a school on the parcel [that is abandoned], it must be conveyed to the County."

Yet, despite these statements about the surplus of Seven Locks, made by members of the County Council and affirmed by the Superintendent and the Board of Education on May 13, 2004;

MCPS staff members at the recent FAC meetings have insisted that no decision has been made to surplus Seven Locks.

Closing 40-year-old Seven Locks Elementary at its current location at Bradley Boulevard and Seven Locks Road will abruptly change the fabric of that neighborhood, alter people's home values, and, indeed, their day-to-day lives. Is it any surprise that they come to express themselves in any forum --appropriate or not (like operational budget hearings, boundary hearings, and now the FAC meetings) -- with the MCPS or County Council audience? We accomplished almost nothing constructive at the last FAC meeting.

We, in the Kendale neighborhood, badly need the FAC meetings to discuss our concerns with MCPS, the architect, and other experts, in order to protect our neighborhood as much as we can. We can all empathize with the MCPS staff members, who have little latitude to make adjustments, given the relative sizes of the school planned and of the Kendale lot. The larger community wants to be heard. If they are not given a proper public forum, we may need to schedule FAC meetings into the distant future until our concerns are addressed and the details finalized. More importantly, it may be many years before the anger of these citizens dissipates.

Why not grant the communities in the Seven Locks area a realistic and viable public forum, so that they can ask their very legitimate questions and, hopefully, be given honest and responsible answers?

Superintendent Weast also stated on May 13, 2004, "We are continually open to the input process..."

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