

COUNTY COUNCIL PUBLIC HEARING
FY 06 Capital Budget and FY05-10 Capital Improvements Program
(CIP)
Amendments for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)

May 3, 2005
Statement for the Record
By
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My name is Ambassador Sandy Vogelgesang, representing the West Bradley Citizens' Association. Together with the rest of the 6000-family Seven Locks Coalition and Seven Locks PTA, we strongly oppose the County School Board's decision in 2004 to reverse the County Council's own directed plan (2000- 2003) to expand and modernize Seven Locks Elementary School and, instead, to close Seven Locks, build a 740-student core replacement school on Kendale Road, and propose surplusing the Seven Locks site for high-density housing.

This statement for the record addresses three issues, elaborated below:

- 1. Community opposition.** Why do we oppose the School Board "flip-flop" on Seven Locks?
- 2. Budget questions.** What are the real budget facts on Seven Locks?
- 3. Options for Council consideration.** How can the Council help address educational needs in the Seven Locks area and still save taxpayer money?

Our overall message to you is clear:

- **The Council should, in the face of the current budget challenge, demonstrate firm fiscal responsibility.**
- **One way to save money and thus help honor the charter tax cap and quell the growing taxpayer revolt is to take a hard look at the County School Budget. If our experience with Seven Locks Elementary is representative, that budget may be ripe for cuts.**

- **For example, why close Seven Locks School when over 17000 County students are parked in trailers?**
- **Why spend over \$20 million on a new school when less than \$10 million is required to expand Seven Locks and thus meet the most urgent educational needs in our neighborhood?**
- **We ask you to direct the School Board to re-activate a variant of your original plan for Seven Locks Elementary, starting with an addition this year. Alternately, at least defer any approval for the Seven Locks project until you and the community have the opportunity to assess the full range of cost-effective options.**

Reasons for Community Opposition to the School Board Plan for Seven Locks

As the strong protests from our community and the petition signed by over 1300 voters attest, our community is dead-set against wasting taxpayer money by closing our school and building a large new replacement school. (Attached is one illustrative page of signatures from our petition.) Our reasons for opposition are clear:

- **Concern about losing the heart of the Seven Locks neighborhood.** The Seven Locks School is more than our school. It is our main meeting place and the only large recreation and green space within walking distance for our children.
- **Anger over lack of community input and due process** (documented in legal appeal to the State of Maryland and prior testimony). The School Board and Superintendent have consistently misrepresented community and PTA views and refused to answer key questions or participate in an open dialogue.
- **Unsuitability of small Kendale site with major environmental and safety challenges.** Why build a 740-student core school near a designated “flood area” which needs a costly storm water management system? Why choose a site with only eight buildable acres? Why choose a site that requires removing and replanting 9.4 acres of trees? Why proceed without a final traffic and parking plan that addresses major safety questions? **The overwhelming majority of the Seven Locks parents and local residents attending the School Board’s final Facility Advisory Committee meeting voted against the replacement school site plan on Kendale Road and for retaining the current Seven Locks School.**

■ **Opposition to surplus school property** with a functioning school when so many County children lack classrooms. For example, why close Seven Locks when the adjacent elementary school (Bells Mills) has five trailers? Why close Seven Locks when there is demographic turnover and increasing development in the Seven Locks area that will require more school space?

■ **Political agenda.** The Superintendent stated that the shift on Seven Locks was done partly to respond to the County Executive's request for school property that can be used for affordable housing. Numerous developers have been approached regarding high-density development of the Seven Locks site, despite disclaimers from the School Board and others that no decision has been made on surplus.

■ **Waste of taxpayer money.** See discussion below.

Budget Questions on Seven Locks

Given the tough budget choices confronting the County Council, we ask you to assess the real cost of the School Board's plan for Seven Locks, as per the points noted below. (A more detailed list of questions has been provided to the Education Committee, at the request of Chairman Mike Subin and Council Members Denis, Silverman, Praisner and Knapp.)

- **Actual construction cost of the Seven Locks "replacement" school on Kendale Road.** The School Board is seeking **\$12,256,000** in the FY06 appropriation for Seven Locks. Yet, the revised "total project cost" of the facility, including gym, according to MCPS data (3/17/2005) is \$15,224,000. Since that information was provided by MCPS, the School Board has indicated that construction costs will increase by at least 20 percent. Thus, the construction price tag is likely to be an estimated **\$18,268,000 or more**. Further, the MCPS cost estimates do not include the construction cost of the planned 8-classroom addition for the replacement school. Most telling, Education Chairman Subin indicated to the Seven Locks Coalition (March 15, 2005) that the overall construction cost of the Kendale facility is **likely to exceed \$20 million**.

- **Full/full cost of the Kendale facility.** The MCPS data do not/not include non-construction costs and some other relevant costs. For example, cost data do not cover required widening of the narrow and winding Kendale Road; installation of paved shoulders and drainage ditches; sidewalks; street lighting; completed storm water management system with capacity appropriate to anticipated water volume, conveyance to local stream, and provision for treating sediment run-off from the entire site; penalty for exceeding County conservation threshold for removal of 9.4 acres of trees; etc. Although the School Board says that such costs are not relevant for their submission to the County Council because they are covered by other budgets, we taxpayers know that, ultimately, all money will come out of one pocket -- ours! **The full cost – construction and other costs – for Kendale is likely to hit the \$20-25 million range.**

- **Contradictory County Board budget positions.** School Superintendent Weast stated (2/23/2004) that “it is far more cost effective to add onto existing schools than to open additional schools when the amount of projected space needed is modest, as is the case in the Winston Churchill cluster.” Yet, one month later he reversed himself and rationalized the change of plans for Seven Locks by contending that it would be \$2-3 million cheaper to build a new school than to fix up Seven Locks. **As reported previously to the Council and corroborated by some County planning officials, assessment of MCPS cost data seems to indicate needlessly inflated costs for expanding/modernizing Seven Locks Elementary and underestimated costs for the Kendale project.**

- **Inconsistency in School Board priorities.** The School Board has ranked the Seven Locks replacement school near the bottom of its priority list for the State of Maryland (#56 out of 60). (See the memorandum from Superintendent Weast, dated April 25, 2005.). Yet, in other accounts made available to the public, the County School Board has ranked Seven Locks much higher and indicated that it plans to proceed on this project even though that approach apparently means bumping higher-priority projects elsewhere in the County.

- **Plan for forward funding.** Does the County Council plan to cover all the costs for the replacement school, both planning and construction, even though the State of Maryland does not recommend approval of this project for planning in FY 2006? The Public School

Construction Program (PSCP) has indicated that, if MCPS wishes to proceed with the project without State approval, it will be submitted as a locally funded project. How much must the County pay to do so? What is the penalty paid by County taxpayers for proceeding without State approval?

- **School Board funding shortfall.** Will the School Board need the additional \$4 million recently requested from the County Council to cover cost overruns in order to build the Seven Locks replacement school? Given the County's tight budget, the community is willing to defer modernization of Seven Locks.

Options for Council Consideration

In light of the budget challenge faced by the Council, our community asks that the Council join in assessing the complete range of cost-effective options that could serve the educational needs of our children. To that end, we ask that you consider the following illustrative questions and options:

- Does it make sense to close and raze the existing Seven Locks Elementary School when 17000 County students are in trailers? In particular, why tear down Seven Locks when the adjacent school (**Bells Mills Elementary**) is overcapacity (students in five portables) and there is reportedly no funding available for planned expansion and modernization of Bells Mills? Why not keep Seven Locks open to house the students in the immediate Seven Locks area, including the Bells Mills overflow and the growing student population due to demographic turnover and increasing development in the Seven Locks neighborhood?
- Why not proceed with the needed addition for **Farmland Elementary School** which is above Seven Locks on the County's priority ranking submitted to the State of Maryland? Students at Farmland have been using portables for over twenty years. That school, like some others, has apparently been bumped from the expansion/modernization queue by using the gimmick of a "replacement" school for Seven Locks.
- Why not address the crux of the problem, overcrowding at **Potomac Elementary**, directly by providing that school prompt relief on site?

Or, why not consider using the School Board's 20-acre so-called middle school site on **Brickyard Road** for an elementary school and recreation area to serve the faster-growing Potomac area? The Superintendent has stated that the Brickyard Road site is not needed as a middle school site in the Churchill cluster.

- **Finally, and most sensible for FY 2006**, why not just expand **Seven Locks Elementary School** and defer modernization until the budget permits? Using the already completed MCPS plan for a 10-room classroom addition and gymnasium -- augmented by some reconfiguration to achieve added core capacity for a 500-550-student school -- would meet current and projected area needs. This expansion could be completed, according to MCPS, by September 2006 (one year earlier than the Kendale facility). It would thus provide faster relief for Potomac Elementary and others. There would be no need for a holding school. MCPS plans and budget for the addition (\$7.4 million) already include expanded entry and egress onto Seven Locks and Bradley Boulevard to address traffic issues. The community believes that Seven Locks Elementary, like the four other schools located along Seven Locks, is already safe for our children and will be even more so with the road plans prepared by MCPS.

Conclusion and Recommendation for Council Action

In sum, the Seven Locks community has (1) serious concerns about the School Board's ill-conceived plan for Seven Locks, (2) specific budget questions, and (3) proposals for options that might make more sense for all concerned. **On the basis of these points, we ask you to:**

- **Reverse the School Board plan for Seven Locks so that MCPS can proceed with a variant of the first part of your original recommendation for the Seven Locks area --namely, expand the existing Seven Locks Elementary School.**
- **If you are not prepared to take this step, which we consider preferable, defer any action on Seven Locks until there has been the opportunity for true community dialogue with County officials and a review of the full range of options. A small informal task force could review educational priorities and cost-**

effective possibilities for the West Bethesda/Potomac area and present recommendations for the School Board and next County Council budget.

- **Either of these approaches would serve our children well, save money, and help restore political peace in County-community relations.**

Attachment: One illustrative page of signatures from more than 1300 collected on one recent weekend

(Seven Locks – May 2005 Budget Testimony)