

**Mandatory Referral Application – Seven Locks Elementary School
(Replacement)
Montgomery County Planning Board Hearing
May 5, 2005**

**Revised Statement for the Record
Accompanied by Oral Summary
by
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Introduction

This statement is made in behalf of the West Bradley Citizens' Association, the 600-home community adjacent to Seven Locks Elementary School in Bethesda. Our civic association, along with the more than 6000 families represented by the Seven Locks Coalition and the Seven Locks PTA, opposes the County School Board's decision to shift from longstanding plans to expand and modernize Seven Locks Elementary School and, instead, to close that school, build a 740-student core "replacement" school on Kendale Road, and consider surplusing the Seven Locks site for affordable housing (in response to the written request from the County Executive).

Although the focus of this hearing is the preliminary site and building plan for the Seven Locks "replacement" school, we believe that the Board should review this plan within the broader context of sound land use policy and the stated goals of the Potomac Subregion Master Plan. Doing so will highlight why the Seven Locks Coalition thinks that the proposal before you violates basic common sense.

- The School Board **plan destroys two neighborhoods** (Kendale and Seven Locks) in order to provide relief for overcrowding at Potomac Elementary School.
- It proposes a project that **will cost more than twice as much** (estimated \$20 million versus estimated \$8 million) as the proposal

endorsed by the Seven Locks PTA and community (addition to current Seven Locks and deferral on modernization).

- It advocates closing Seven Locks Elementary when the County has over **17000 students parked in trailers**.
- It opens the door to development on the Seven Locks site that could exacerbate already major **traffic gridlock** at the intersection of Seven Locks Road and Bradley Boulevard. Superintendent Weast stated, as part of his explanation for the change of plans for Seven Locks, that he was responding to the request from County Executive Douglas Duncan for identification of school property that might be declared surplus by the School Board and then used by the County for **affordable or workforce housing**. In light of recently enacted zoning text amendments to encourage development of affordable housing, there is concern in the community that any such development at the site may be high-density with much reduced green space.

With regard to the **public consultation** encouraged by the Planning Board, it should be noted that, contrary to what the School Board has said, the Seven Locks community and PTA have consistently and strongly opposed the change of plans announced in early 2004. Yet, the School Board has proceeded with unseemly speed, withholding information on key questions such as the full cost of available options and ignoring its own procedures for community input. **At the final Facility Advisory Committee meeting on the Kendale site plan, the community voted overwhelmingly against the proposed site plan for the replacement school and for the expansion of the existing Seven Locks School.**

Our community continues to believe that the far better choice for our children and for County taxpayers is to defer action until County officials, together with the concerned community, can review the full range of cost-effective educational options for our children. We believe that such a review might well indicate that the best choice is simply to expand the existing Seven Locks Elementary School. Doing so would provide faster relief to the overcrowding at area schools at less than half the cost. At the very least, we advocate the retention of the precious green space and community center at Seven Locks. Given the Planning Board's projections for a dramatic growth in County housing over the next 25 years, it makes no sense to surplus any school property since all such property will be needed to serve the increased number of students. In that regard, **we applaud the statement**

made by the staff for the Department of Park and Planning regarding the existing Seven Locks Elementary School -- namely, “Surplus and future school sites offer potential for fulfilling some of the recreation needs of the Potomac Subregion. All school sites not otherwise recommended in this Plan for environmental conservation should be considered for other public uses, including park land, if they are declared surplus.”

Our comments for this hearing address three points:

1. General concern about good land use planning
2. Specific questions about the unsuitability of the Kendale site
3. Options and recommendations for Board action

General Concern about Good Land Use Planning

Our community believes that the School Board’s proposal violates fundamental principles of good land use planning. Montgomery County prides itself on (a) fostering a strong sense of neighborhood, (b) preserving scarce green space, (c) involving the community in key decisions that affect them, and (d) exercising fiscal responsibility. The School Board’s proposal undercuts these four basic tenets of County policy, as follows:

- **Neighborhood Identity.** We consider Seven Locks School, not only a valued educational institution, but also the very heart of our community. The school, like most homes in our neighborhood, was built forty years ago. Since then, it has served as the place where we meet and vote. It stands at the geographic center of a homogenous neighborhood – mostly modest ranch-style homes in an area bounded by the Beltway, River Road, Cabin John Regional Park and Democracy Boulevard and quite different from the area of much newer and larger homes west of Cabin John Regional Park where the replacement school is to be built, primarily to service the Potomac/Avenel area. We know that the Planning Board, together with other County officials, is working hard to encourage the development of new communities with town centers and a sense of neighborhood in other parts of the County. Why destroy the heart of our

established neighborhood so that we become just another patch of suburbia with no focal point for family life?

- **Rare Green Space.** We treasure the large green space surrounding Seven Locks Elementary. It is the only recreation area within walking distance for our children. The soccer and lacrosse practice fields are reportedly the most sought after in the County. Our children benefit enormously from the proximity of a recreation area where they can exercise and play safely. Why destroy this rare green space and replace it with high-density housing? Why exacerbate the already growing traffic gridlock along Seven Locks Road?

- **Community Role and Due Process.** From 2000-2003, our community and PTA worked with the School Board on plans to expand and modernize Seven Locks Elementary School. Then, the School Board changed plans abruptly in early 2004 without prior notice to the community. Superintendent Weast did say, when announcing the change of plans, that he was doing so partly in response to the County Executive's request to provide surplus school property for affordable housing. Since then, there has been no real community role in the decision-making process – even though the replacement of our school with what could become a high-density housing development will fundamentally change the character of our entire neighborhood. The School Board has put its new plan on a fast track, without honoring required procedures for community input or feasibility studies. Despite the community's legal appeals to the State of Maryland on lack of due process, testimony at County Council and School Board hearings, a petition signed by over 1300 residents, letters to the press, and other initiatives, the School Board has refused to revisit the issue or answer key questions. For example, how can the School Board document the contention that building the new school is cheaper than fixing the existing school when the Superintendent himself is on record indicating 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.” (2/23/2004 School Board hearing) As noted, contrary to the statement made on page 12 of the staff report for the mandatory referral, the School Board has not responded to the community’s wishes. Although MCPS has modified some particulars of the proposed site plan in response to requests from some residents in the Kendale neighborhood, the community at large voted overwhelmingly against the proposed site plan at the final Facility Advisory Committee meeting on February 8, 2005.

- **Fiscal Management.** Based on information which the community could obtain only from the State of Maryland Public School Construction Program, the community has determined that just the construction of the new school on Kendale Road – not to mention widening of the road and other items – will cost more than twice the simple expansion of Seven Locks that would meet all current and projected student needs in our community (now an estimated \$20 million plus for the Kendale facility, due to rising construction costs, versus an estimated \$8 -10 million for expanding the current school). Builders in our community believe that the School Board has inflated the likely cost of expanding and/or modernizing Seven Locks and underestimated the cost of the replacement school. Why, when the County budget is so tight, waste so much money? Why does the School Board refuse to provide clear data that would enable the County Council, the Planning Board and taxpayers to assess the comparative costs of available options?

Specific Questions about the Unsuitability of the Kendale Site

Our community has several specific questions about the unsuitability of the Kendale Road site for a 740-student core school.

- **Small Site.** Why choose a site with only eight buildable acres, when School Board guidelines for elementary schools

recommend 12 acres? Why choose this small site when larger more appropriate sites are available in the area?

- **Forest Conservation.** Why choose a site where it is necessary to remove and replant approximately 90 percent of the trees, or an estimated 9.5 of 10.5 acres? Where is the final forest conservation plan? What is the amount of what the Park and Planning staff calls the “significant mitigation penalty” for exceeding the 2.5 acres of forest to be removed and causing the reforestation requirement of approximately 4.75 acres off-site?
- **Stormwater management.** Why choose a site requiring a large and expensive stormwater management facility? Could MCPS indicate how the proposed system will handle likely water volume and how it will address conveyance of water from the site to Ken Branch? There is no clear indication as to what happens to the outflow from the water storage facility or from elsewhere on the site. There is no provision for paved shoulders or drainage ditches along Kendale Road. What provision is being made to address community concern about the sediment in stormwater runoff from the site, during and after construction, affecting water quality in Cabin John Creek?
- **Other site challenges.** Why choose a hilly site near a designated “flood area” that often makes the nearby road impassable? Why choose a site requiring major excavation and dirt removal? Why choose a site which, according to reports of soil borings just made available to the community, there will need to be potentially significant blasting of rock on site?
- **Small Recreation Area.** Why choose a site with so little recreation space for so many children? There will be less play space per student at the new school (especially when and if it serves the planned 740-student capacity) than is the case at the current Seven Locks School or even with that facility expanded to the planned 500-550 students. Why lose the use of two soccer fields, a softball field, basketball

court, playground and other recreational facilities at Seven Locks Elementary, only to get the more limited facilities at the new replacement school? Why spend so much money and end up with even less recreation space for our children and those in the County soccer and lacrosse programs that value Seven Locks as one of the most popular practice sites in the County?

- **Unsafe Road/Traffic.** Why choose a site along a narrow and winding country road that must be widened? Has the School Board committed to widening the road, as advocated by the traffic study? If so, why not widen it to the 24-foot standard for a primary road, the current classification for Kendale Road, rather than the 22 feet noted in the traffic survey? The greater width would allow for safer passing of two school buses which, with their side mirrors, can each be ten feet wide. Why has the School Board not indicated any provision for paved shoulders or sidewalks along Kendale Road for the safety of those compelled to walk to school events from Kentsdale or elsewhere? Why not assure full use of Kendale Road in both directions so that there can be egress both north and south of the school in the case of an emergency? Why compromise the safety of children just to assure some residents on the southern end of Kendale Road less traffic in front of their houses? Why no street lights to help assure safety for those who – due to no parking on Kendale – will have to walk from Kentsdale Road to attend evening events at the school? Due to the significant increase in school bus and other traffic to and from the proposed new school, the community requests a formal traffic impact study.

- **Inadequate Parking.** Why choose a site with inadequate parking? Current plans do not provide sufficient parking for large school events or for the rental of the facility for large outside groups. Those attending an event such as “back to school night” will be compelled to walk from busy Kentsdale Road along the dark and narrow Kendale Road (with no sidewalks) to reach the school. There is to be no parking on Kendale Road or any of the streets in the

neighborhood. How does MCPS plan to resolve the difficulty in providing sufficient parking space on site without exceeding the zoning setback for the property? Has any reciprocal arrangement for parking been negotiated with the adjacent German School?

Options and Recommendation for Board Action

Our community – the largest one served by Seven Locks Elementary School – opposes the closing and surplus of Seven Locks School and the building of a large expensive replacement school on the unsuitable site along Kendale Road. It would make much more sense for County officials, working with the concerned community, to pause and explore the full range of options before proceeding with the Seven Locks replacement school. There are obviously many possibilities to review but among them we would suggest considering such items as:

- Proceeding with expansion and modernization where it is needed most -- namely, the Potomac Elementary School. Why destroy two neighborhoods, Kendale and Seven Locks, to solve overcrowding at Potomac Elementary? Why is Potomac Elementary to get no modernization until 2015?
- Expanding Seven Locks Elementary School so that it can accommodate the increasing development and the demographic change underway in our neighborhood (new families with children are replacing the original generation of homeowners) and the student overcapacity at the adjacent Bells Mills Elementary and, if necessary, overcapacity in the Potomac area. Why tear down Seven Locks Elementary when Bells Mills Elementary has students parked in five trailers and expects to have even more portables next year? Since the County is struggling with budget constraints, why not defer expenditure on modernization for Seven Locks so that more urgent County needs can be addressed in the near term?
- Building an elementary school and recreation area on the School Board's 20-acre middle school site on Brickyard Road site that is closer to Potomac Village and the greater

growth area west of Potomac. That School Board property is flat, without forest cover, and available now. Superintendent Weast has stated that the Brickyard site is not needed for middle school use in the Churchill Cluster. Why not use this prime school property?

- Leaving the Kendale site for a smaller educational facility more suitable to that property. Why not formulate a plan that helps preserve more of the Kendale neighborhood and the forest?

Based on the concerns and options noted, our community requests:

- **That the Planning Board reject the application for the Seven Locks replacement school.**
- **If that is not possible, recommend deferral of the proposed replacement school until County officials and the community re-assess the full range of cost-effective options for our neighborhood.**
- **Convey, in any event, the concerns noted in the staff report and the strong citation from the Potomac Master Plan for keeping the Seven Locks site for recreation, if and when the School Board decides to surplus the property for school use.**

In sum, it is not too late for the Planning Board to intervene – in behalf of common sense and sound land use planning. You have the capacity and the responsibility to help serve our children -- and help save a neighborhood, save green space on Seven Locks and Kendale, and save taxpayer money!

(Seven Locks – Planning Board Testimony rev. -5/4/2005)