

Forest Conservation Plan Revisions – Seven Locks Elementary School
Montgomery County Planning Board Hearing
December 22, 2005

Statement for the Record
By
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This statement is made in behalf of the West Bradley Citizens' Association, the 600-family community adjacent to Seven Locks Elementary School in Bethesda. As indicated in our presentation on May 5, 2005 (the hearing on the mandatory referral application for the Seven Locks "replacement" school on Kendale Road), our community strongly:

- Opposes the County School Board's decision to shift from longstanding plans to expand and modernize the current Seven Locks Elementary School, to close that school, and to build a 740-student core "replacement" school on Kendale Road.
- Questions this plan within the broader context of sound land use planning and the stated goals of the Potomac Sub-region Master Plan.

Our community has appreciated the thoughtful assistance of Callum Murray and his staff and others at the Department of Park and Planning throughout the review of this project. We have appreciated as well the statements of Planning Board Members who concur with our belief that the Kendale property is an unsuitable site for a large elementary school.

We understand that the Planning Board has little latitude to intervene on this or any MCPS project, with the exception of the required forest conservation plan. We regret that you can comment only on the specifics of that forest plan and not on whether it makes sense to cut down almost ten acres of trees along Kendale Road rather than simply build on the current Seven Locks site where few, if any trees, need to be cut down.

That said, given the apparent limits on the Planning Board's authority regarding school property, we will state for the record our view that the Seven Locks case – like the situation in Clarksburg – reflects a larger failure of governance in Montgomery County.

- Why should the County School Board and MCPS be able, with no prior notice to the community, to scrap plans underway for four years on our local school?

- By what authority can they simply ignore the ensuing strong opposition of the concerned community and PTA – particularly when the MCPS decision (closing the current school and possibly opening the door for high-density development on that site) will fundamentally alter the character of a neighborhood affecting thousands of families? (Note: the School Superintendent cited the County Executive's request for school land to be used for affordable housing as one reason for the change in plans for Seven Locks.)
- Why abolish a school that is not only a valued educational facility that wins top State ranking on math and reading, but also the main community center for our neighborhood and the only recreation area within walking distance for our children? Isn't some sense of neighborhood important in Montgomery County?
- Why choose, instead, a site requiring massive deforestation and a costly storm water management system to deal with recurrent floods, and one with major safety problems on narrow Kendale Road?
- Why make a decision rationalized partly as a means to save money but refuse to answer repeated questions as to the actual price tag? Why won't MCPS tell anyone – including (so far) the County Office of the Inspector General and the County Council – the full cost of the replacement school? Is it because it would actually be cheaper, as stated earlier by Superintendent Weast, to expand an existing school?
- Who is really responsible for making decisions on our schools, including Seven Locks? The School Board and MCPS say they are responding to the County Executive's request for surplus school land to be used for affordable housing. But, the County Executive and most members of the County Council say that they cannot get involved in School Board decisions. Members of the Planning Board say that they cannot question a "political" decision made elsewhere. Result: No one addresses the community's question: Where does the buck really stop on expenditures that constitute over half the County budget? Is there no way to reverse a bad decision before setting the precedent for wasting taxpayer money on a project that will harm our children, change two neighborhoods, and hurt the environment?

Bottom line:

Although the blame for the Seven Locks mess lies elsewhere, our community believes that the Seven Locks case provides a sad commentary on the role of the Planning Board and others. It is shocking and disappointing that the Planning Board has no apparent power to question a decision made by the School Board and others in the Montgomery County government. Citizens in this County depend on the Planning Board to stand up for sound land use planning and compliance with the spirit and letter of agreed master plans. We know that some on the Planning Board and many on the staff share our frustration. That said, the fact remains that the handling of the Seven Locks case, if representative, suggests that community-based planning may often be more of a myth than a reality. Most important, the Seven Locks situation suggests that ordinary citizens have no real recourse to accountable government. It's time for a change!

