

Seven Locks IG Report Reveals Scandal Worse Than Clarksburg
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The long-awaited Inspector General's (IG) report on Seven Locks Elementary School (SLES) tells of MCPS officials who engaged in misinformation, misdirection and even deception related to the unnecessarily convoluted processes and decisions made to build a new school on the nearby Kendale Road site instead of enlarging, modernizing, or building new on the current Seven Locks Road site. The report reveals that MCPS officials claimed nonexistent community support for the new site, misrepresented statements by community leaders about the new site, overstated the costs to build on the existing site and failed to share the most cost effective alternative with the Board of Education (BoE) and the County Council. While the IG showed remarkable restraint in passing any judgments, it is clear that MCPS officials engaged in outrageous behavior, even if this were "just" an isolated incident.

What we now call "Clarksburg" started out as a small problem in the one of a number of projects that will become the town of Clarksburg. SLES is but one of 125 elementary schools in the county. What makes this worse is that MCPS does not follow its own regulations that require competitive bids for contracts valued at more than \$25,000. According to the report, MCPS officials not only did not follow their own procedures in awarding an initial \$28,000 contract to evaluate the original SLES site, but then awarded what amounted to an additional \$890,000 no-bid contract to the same architect to design the replacement school. MCPS officials justified this noncompetitive approach with - "The feasibility architect for Seven Locks has a proven track record on previous school projects for us and other jurisdictions and did a good job on the feasibility study. The principal and staff were satisfied with their performance and recommended that they be retained for the design services."

As the citizens' group, the Clarksburg Town Community Advisory Committee (CTCAC) eventually joined by county officials, delved deeper into the problems with Clarksburg Town Center, and discovered that one staff person had allowed so many major site plan changes as to render the built community unrecognizable from the approved plans. They learned of so many cozy relationships, lax practices and indifference to laws and regulations that there has been a complete reorganization taking place at MNCPPC for the last 6 months. MNCPPC has had to check over 100 site plans approved since 2003 to see if other violations have occurred and MCCF has also provided its own evidence of additional violations.

There will need to be the same kind of investigation made of MCPS to see how many other no-bid contracts have been awarded for architectural and other services by MCPS over the last few years and to determine how much MCPS may have overpaid for creating such a lax atmosphere favoring architects with "a proven track record." This investigation could trigger the same level of reorganization at MCPS as at MNCPPC and the same reexamination of many other related practices that may violate laws and regulations. The evidence provided in this report points to a possible Clarksburg level of improper behavior by MCPS officials and their relationship with their vendors.

What makes this far worse than Clarksburg is the response to this IG report by BoE member and Audit Committee Chair Stephen Abrams, by stating that he asked for legal opinions about the suitability of this audit report: "Each of these legal opinions concludes

that State law does not provide such authority to the Inspector General." He then went on to question the motivation of the IG, while admitting to the decision-making process used to choose the Kendale site.

As with those agencies involved in Clarksburg, Mr. Abrams also did his own share of finger-pointing about the failure of MCPS officials to reveal the most cost effective approach of building a new Seven Locks on the original site: "The Council members were aware of the [SLES] issues and made no request at any time during the review of the [SLES] project to provide information on doing the addition and modernization at the same time or to build a replacement school on the Seven Locks site."

Mr. Abrams concluded with this: "After consulting with the Board president [Charles Haughty] and vice president [Sharon Cox], the Audit Committee has informed the superintendent and staff not to respond to your report or your specific findings. In addition, the Audit Committee does not plan to make a recommendation to the [BoE] on the other findings in your evaluation."

As far as I am concerned, the IG and his staff have truly distinguished themselves with a quality report.. In addition to Clarksburg, "Seven Locks" requires the County Council to face a new issue of how to make BoE and MCPS fiscally responsible to those who provide them with most of their capital and operating funds. Reversing the decision to build new on the Kendale site and instead choosing to build new on the Seven Locks site will be the easiest step of all.

Creating mechanisms for accountability will be tougher still, if BoE and MCPS take the same pugnacious approach to the Council as articulated by Mr. Abrams in his letter to the IG. The specific accountability of MCPS Superintendent Weast for Seven Locks and related matters will need to be considered and questions will need to be asked of the oversight role, or lack thereof, of State School Superintendent Nancy Grasmick. While there was some brief initial talk of state involvement in MNCPPC, since it is a quasi-state agency, there may need to be much talk with the state legislature if the state sovereignty shield continues to be waved about by Mr. Abrams and others. The State Special Prosecutor may also need to be invited to take a look.

Most important of all, the residents of Montgomery County, whether or not in a PTA, will need to make the phrase "Seven Locks" their call for educational accountability, and will need to make sure that long overdue reforms take place.