

ON THE PROPOSED REVISION OF POLICY FAA: Some Progress But Much Resistance

By Mark R. Adelman, Chair, Education Committee

This is a follow-on report to my article in the April MCCF Newsletter (p. 4); please see that for background material. The Policy Committee of the Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE) has responded to the concerns raised by Civic Fed and by the MCCPTA (Montgomery County Council of Parent and Teacher Associations) regarding the proposed revision of Policy FAA (Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning).^{*} Both groups have expressed similar objections to the proposed revisions and were invited to attend the April 21 meeting of the Policy Committee, which we did. The committee had already reacted to suspicions that the policy revision is intended to reduce community input into the planning process, by adding back explicit wording as to the need for community input. After discussing amongst themselves (and with staff) several additional modifications, the committee invited comment from MCCF, MCCPTA and other members of the public who were in attendance. While some additional progress was made, a number of "sticking points" became obvious:

1. The committee (and thus the BoE) is NOT likely to accede to our requests that final action on FAA be delayed to allow more time for the BoE to explain the need for such extensive revision of the policy and for the public to study and comment on the draft revision. Certain items in the existing document (available on the BoE website [<http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/boe/>] under "Board Policy") must be revised by early summer to meet Maryland State Department of Education mandates, but the number of such items appears very small and the committee was not responsive to the repeated suggestion that an interim minimal revision be passed that would meet state regulations, but allow time for more discussion of revision of other sections.
2. The BoE regards our having been invited to the April 21 meeting (and another scheduled for May 11 - which we plan to attend) as adequate response to our request that the BoE President discuss the matter with MCCF delegates at one of our regular meetings; we have been told that the BoE does not testify before other groups because it regards its deliberations as open to the public and it routinely accepts testimony from concerned citizens at various hearings, etc.
3. The BoE appears to regard the current FAA as a cumbersome combination of policy and "regulation" (working process) and feels that most of the "nuts and bolts" of FAA should be in a companion regulation document, to be called FAA-RA. No current FAA-RA exists, but a draft version is available on the BoE website. The BoE does not appear to have planned a timeframe for action on and passage of FAA-RA. Our Education Committee is presently reading the draft, will have comments on it (and the evolving revision of Policy FAA) ready for the May 11 meeting, and will push for passage of an interim version of FAA-RA simultaneous

with passage of any revision of Policy FAA.

The apparent insistence of the BoE (via its Policy Committee), that Policy FAA must be extensively revised in a very short time frame, is fueling "conspiracy theories" that the Superintendent and the BoE want to cut citizens out of the planning process. My own personal view (a sort of "tragedy of errors" theory) is that the BoE is out of touch with community perceptions and does not understand why a process that they regard as "standard" (all existing policy documents are being reviewed on a rolling schedule) should be causing such heated objections. They clearly do not understand that the timing of the proposal to revise Policy FAA could not have been worse, coming as it has at a time when numerous groups (including MCCF and MCCPTA) are frustrated at their inability to get the BoE to alter course on a number of contested actions. And the BoE does not appear to understand public objection to the ongoing process, by which they have essentially adopted the tactic of throwing out "everything" and then putting back in only those elements over which specific "battles" have been fought. Because the proposed revised version of Policy FAA is now in a constant state of flux, the only way to find it (as of this writing) is to go to the BoE website, click on "public announcements" and hope that the first page that comes up has a link to the most current pdf version. I perceive the BoE as having backed itself into a corner, with no graceful exit strategy. Growing public resentment, suspicion and distrust is the predictable, but extremely unfortunate, consequence. The MCCF Education Committee will continue to work on this issue, striving for the best compromise that can be achieved. We welcome any comments that MCCF delegates (or other concerned citizens) care to send our way.

* FAA is an internal BoE filing code and is not an abbreviation for anything; the existing Policy FAA is a carefully-crafted mix of "policy" and "regulation" that enumerates a number of decision paths in which parents and communities must be involved. The document is some 20 pages long and impossible to summarize here. The proposed revised version is about 7 pages, and growing.

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