

MONTGOMERY COUNTY HAS UNNEEDED SCHOOL SITES: SAYS WHO??

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

Does the Montgomery County Public School (MCPS) system have unneeded properties? No, that is NOT a trick question, and it does not require a rocket scientist to answer. [Hint: NO!!] It's a question that is easy to answer if you are thinking big picture, but, if the question is hidden by posing it in a very small box, it is easy to make the question appear tricky. Let me clarify: this issue has emerged, not as one about education, nor about common sense, but about political priorities. Politics and public education do not mix well; that's why MCPS and its Board of Education (BoE) are - and should remain - distinct from the County Government. But that is not the way the County Executive and the County Council (CE/CC) see it.

The CE/CC are on a mission: to increase the supply of affordable housing in Montgomery County. To this end they are scouring county files for unused land parcels. Last fall Mr. Duncan asked Superintendent Weast and the BoE to declare three MCPS properties surplus to the needs of MCPS and thus authorize their transfer to the County: the three are the so-called Edson Lane, Brickyard Road, and Kendale Road parcels, all in the Potomac and North Bethesda areas. Mr. Duncan cleverly made his initial request for just three small pieces of land, possibly to obscure the larger issues (see below). Dr. Weast (and the BoE) initially indicated willingness to surplus the sites but, after a firestorm from outraged citizens, proposed to study the issue and determine how best to use the sites, ie. were they really not needed and, if surplussed, what "revenue" would they generate for MCPS. In this context, "revenue" might mean actual money or "just" goodwill. After all, MCPS gets most of its money from the CE/CC. At present, more than one billion dollars per year (over 50% of the total County budget) goes to MCPS.

Now, Dr. Weast, after studying the matter, has proposed that the Edson Lane "parcel is surplus to the needs of MCPS ... and, with the approval of the state superintendent of schools, it may be conveyed to the Montgomery County Government for disposition". This proposal is part of the CIP upon which the BoE will soon vote. The other parcels are not yet proposed to be declared unneeded, but they will surely be up for consideration very soon, as next week's Sentinel article regarding the Seven Locks ES, will make clear. Dr. Weast may just be playing the political game, making the pre-determined decisions in small steps, so as to obscure the bigger issues and diffuse citizen concerns by dividing our focus. But he may also be attempting to slow the process and give us all bite-size morsels to digest and think about. Why the Edson Lane parcel first? I got the MCPS maps on the parcel and drove over to see it. Small (1.75 acres), undeveloped (a wooded lot between two small townhouse clusters), adjacent to several large playing fields of the Tilden MS (at Woodward). Unused? Yes. Unneeded? Well that depends on the context. It could be the site for a small building, say for arts/crafts or storage. Or it could be used to extend the playing fields. Or, if affordable housing for teachers and support staff is the goal, why not use the site as the basis for a school-based version of Habitat for Humanity; let students (from Tilden and other schools) help in the construction of affordable housing that is then rented to qualifying teachers/support staff for a limited time period? Or what about just leaving the parcel the way it is, so kids can see a few trees and the overall site retains some small amount of buffer from the nearby frenzied traffic and hustle/bustle. I just don't believe that the issue has been discussed enough, by enough people. And I share the opinion of many people that, given the current state of overcrowding of our schools and the repeated inability of MCPS to project accurately enrollment changes, it makes NO sense to get rid of ANY MCPS property that might be used for ANY education-related purpose.

Now what about the bigger picture? Are these three sites the only ones that might be surplussed? Many of our schools (like Tilden MS at Woodward) are constructed on sites made up of multiple land parcels that have NOT been combined into one property. Many of them still

have small parcels on which nothing is built and the land is either unused or is functioning as a playing field or a green space buffer zone. Why not use all such parcels for affordable housing? How serious are the CE/CC about expanding the pool of affordable housing in our county? Many who have studied the issue argue that such housing has become increasingly scarce in part because our elected officials have been more concerned about pleasing developers (who do not after all make as much money on MPDUs as on high-end townhouses), than about using existing regulations to force the development of lower cost housing. By my calculations, if the Edson Lane parcel were used to build townhouses at maximum allowable density and the past is any guideline, something like a maximum of five MPDUs MIGHT result. Many would doubt that even five would be produced. Is that enough to justify giving anyway an MCPS parcel than can NEVER be recovered? Several have pointed out that the BoE is just that, NOT the Board of Housing; if MCPS policies and resources are to be used in the cause of helping teachers and support staff find affordable housing in Montgomery County, why not arrange to do this in a way that assures MCPS derives educational benefits for our children and MCPS retains long-term control of the "unneeded" parcels. Others have pointed out that Dr. Weast and members of the BoE work for us, not the CE/CC. If Dr. Weast and the BoE are concerned that MCPS budgets will be cut unless they give in to pressure to surplus selected school parcels, let's stiffen their resolve (to do the best they can for our kids) by reminding them that the CE/CC also work for us and we will demand that future County budgets continue to adequately fund our schools. Alternatively, any actions taken by the BoE that appear to put Executive-driven initiatives above the needs of our children, can only lead us to be less likely to support the massive use of county tax dollars for MCPS.

Does MCPS have unneeded school sites? Absent any real dialogue on this issue, the answer still appears to be NO! If there is an argument to be made otherwise, PROVE IT.

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