

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

Statement for the Record
Accompanied by Oral Summary
by
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West Bradley Citizens' Association
Member Organization, Save Seven Locks Coalition

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, 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 surplusng the Seven Locks site for high-density housing.

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, in response to the County Executive's request, to tearing down the school and surplusng the site for high-density development at an intersection already subject to traffic gridlock.

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 proposal for the replacement school and for the expansion of the existing Seven Locks School. We continue 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 Seven Locks!

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 next steps

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 a high-density housing project 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 in the case in the Winston Churchill cluster." (2/23/2004 School Board hearing)

- **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, due to rising construction costs, versus an estimated \$8 million). 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?
- **Environmental Challenges.** Why choose a site where there are so many environmental challenges? Why cut down and replant over 1000 trees, the equivalent of 9.4 acres on a ten-acre site? Where is the final forest conservation plan and what cost is entailed for complying with County regulations and exceeding the conservation threshold? 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 requiring a large and expensive storm water 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? 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.
- **Small Recreation Area.** Why choose a site with so little recreation space for so many children? There will be less play space for the students 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. Why lose the two soccer fields, softball field, basketball court and playground at Seven Locks Elementary, only to get one soccer field superimposed on a softball field for a 740-student school? Why spend so much money and end up with even less recreation space per student?
- **Unsafe Road.** 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?

- **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 Next Steps

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 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 when no near-term funds are available for expansion/modernization of that school? 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 20-acre 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. 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?

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 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.)

Written Testimony for
Montgomery County Park and Planning
May 5, 2005

Cyril W. Draffin, Jr.
PRESIDENT, DEERFIELD-WEATHERED OAK CITIZENS ASSOCIATION
Regarding Seven Locks Elementary School & its Proposed Replacement
April 28, 2005

Issues and reasons Park and Planning should be concerned with County Plans for Seven Locks Elementary School site and the proposed new elementary school on Kendale Road:

- **Need to maintain Community fields/centers.** Prudent land use planning would maintain community centers with playing fields that are surrounded by established communities that use them
 - Tearing down public community centers/schools in established neighborhoods contradicts goals of Park and Planning
 - Current Seven Locks School field at Bradley & Seven Locks Roads is one of the most requested fields in Montgomery County (e.g. by MSI teams)
 - **Some County officials do not want this public land used for public purposes**

- **Require transparency in planning and publicly criticize County organizations that do not follow their rules.** Allowing Board of Education to make decisions (building on Kendale Road with initial plans to discard Seven Locks site) affecting two neighborhoods and a school with NO community input reflects poor planning and a manifestation of an autocratic government
 - For over 3 years MCPS had been planning for expansion of Seven Locks Elementary School at its current site and to maintain the playing fields – suddenly a political deal (occurring in less than a 2 week period) resulted in the Superintendent of Schools changing his mind and deciding his charter included land use planning for the county
 - Superintendent of Schools Weast’s planning is flawed. He stated last year (February 2004) that an addition at an elementary school like Seven Locks in the Churchill Cluster would be cheaper than a new replacement school—then in an affront to open planning he reversed course.
 - In the summer of 2004 the MCPS Director of Planning, Joe Lavorgna wrote to the community that MCPS would not answer questions from the community—they did not want the community involved in evaluating their information or motives for a 180 degree change in planning.

- **Avoid deforestation gimmicks.** Plan to allow deforestation of Kendale Road and planting trees elsewhere suggests all parks and some school land in one part of the county could be converted to concrete if trees were planted in another part—that seems to make a farce of keeping green space where people live.
 - If school is built on Kendale Road, Park and Planning should actively campaign to keep the green space on the current Seven Locks School Site. There is no other flat green space for well over a mile. Why give up the large green recreation area around the current Seven Locks School and tear down the very functional school (based on a state review of current Seven Locks school building in fall of 2004) to construct high-density housing?
 - Are there plans to cut down over 1000 trees on the Kendale site to construct a mega-school, with very limited playing fields? Why try to cram a 740-student core school onto only eight "buildable" acres next to a designated flood area along a narrow and winding road? Where will the outflow from the expensive new storm water management system go once it leaves the school property? Will there be even more floods totally blocking Kendale Road?

- **Limit County's actions that waste financial resources.** County Funds are being used inappropriately at Kendale Road school (partially due to a bait and switch). Costs of Kendale site have risen due to recent storm water management regulations (that MCPS underestimated) and actual design costs are higher for the small, heavily wooded, sloping Kendale Road site, than the average costs MCPS used to gain initial approval—does Park and Planning require projects to estimate realistic actual costs, or are county agencies able to use unrealistically low costs to get Park and Planning approval and then overspend later.

- **No State School Construction Funds for Seven Locks School Replacement.** The Executive Director of the Public School Construction of State of Maryland, Dr. Lever, stated that the Seven Locks Replacement School will not get state funding this year—a requirement in the MCPS CIP for going ahead—in part because the Seven Lock Replacement project is **#41 on school projects for Montgomery County** as submitted to the State of Maryland, and less than 10 schools in Montgomery County were funded.
 - MSPS may push the County for deficit spending (borrowing).
 - Montgomery County is likely to never to get any state money for a Seven Locks School Replacement school by pushing ahead on Kendale Road school this year.

- **Avoid allowing Seven Locks Elementary School land be declared surplus.** Having the Board of Education consider declaring the Seven Locks Elementary school site surplus makes no planning sense if the Montgomery County has 17,000 students in trailers (in part due to MCPS eagerness to surplus school properties in the past). MCPS demographic projections have been very wrong in the past, and MCPS does not consider future projects or in-fill development in the

Bethesda area so giving up land now will leave future generations of students without schools and playing fields.

- Neighborhood associations representing over 6000 homes, the Montgomery County Civic Federation, the Montgomery County PTA, and many other groups and individuals have all testified against and written letters again plans to surplus school land in general and Seven Locks Elementary School site in particular.
- Having any school site turned over County officials for housing is foolish planning, and short changes all future generations of children and citizens
- **The Master Plan should be followed.** The Seven Locks School site is zoned for ½ acre housing, but is best used for playing fields and educational purposes.

In conclusion, our community strongly believes that **the Seven Locks Elementary School site should be used for playing fields and educational purposes and not be declared surplus** by the Board of Education based on pressure from the County Council.

We also question whether any proper planning was done in determining whether to build needed school space on Kendale Road, the current Seven Locks Elementary School site, or another alternative. If proper planning was important, the community organizations should be involved before decision are made and not after basic land and community planning was done in Superintendent Weast's office over a two-week period. Park and Planning **should consider not approving the Kendale site** until reforestation and storm water management issues are fully resolved and fully costed, and perhaps delaying project until proper community/regional planning is done.

Some Background from my April 2004 testimony to County Council as soon as new plans were made public:

School Board prior predictions have been wrong

The Montgomery County Public Schools and Board of Education have made projections in the past, which were wrong. From 1968 to 2003, the student populations increased by 20,000—now over 85% of these 20,000 students are in trailers. Assuming it is not the policy of the County Council [or Park and Planning] to put students in trailers, one can only surmise the School Board projections and plans were flawed. In the Churchill Cluster they closed Cabin John Middle School, only to reopen it a couple years later, and now it is overcrowded. They were considering closing Seven Locks Elementary School in early 1980's, only to recently recommend the school should be doubled in size [or a school build on Kendale].

Transparency assists in better Planning

There is need for transparency. The community wants to be included in the process. The community wants to know what is being considered and the assumptions and analysis behind those plans. The Seven Locks Elementary School (*at intersection of Seven Locks Road and Bradley Boulevard*) is in our community association boundary (*CA0384 of Montgomery County Department of Park and Planning, located in the Potomac planning area with a Bethesda zip code*). In the past we have been excluded from the process, and we want to avoid that happening in the future:

- For two years, including as recently as the October 2003 FY2005 Capital Budget and Capital Improvements Program (*Superintendent's FY 2005 Recommended Capital Budget and FY 2005 to FY 2010 Capital Improvements Program, Montgomery County Public Schools Department of Planning and Capital Programming, October 29, 2003*), Superintendent Weast and his staff were recommending renovation, addition and gymnasium for Seven Locks Elementary School.
- The Superintendent made his recommendation to surplus the MCPS property when according to the 2004 Housing Opportunities Commission's Legislative Priorities (*February 4, 2004*), they have "identified 1,200 pieces of vacant or underdeveloped County property that could be declared surplus and used for affordable housing" and there is substantial school overcrowding in this area of Montgomery County.
- We understand the Board of Education has had closed meetings in the past to surplus school sites. There may have been plans to vote on the current surplus property issue in a closed session. There is no assurance that without the involvement of the Attorney General's Office in Baltimore (*staff attorney in charge of open meeting act compliance*) that might not have been done.
- Weast's February 23 recommendation (*Superintendent's Recommendation on the County's Request to Surplus the Brickyard Road, Kendale Road, and Edson Lane*

Properties; issued February 23, 2004) stated, "If a replacement school project could be funded on a timeline that would provide needed capacity relief for Potomac Elementary School and not impact the queue of elementary school modernizations, I believe the community would support the plan to surplus the Seven Locks site." With whom did he or his staff talk in the community? It was not the neighborhood association in which Seven Locks Elementary School is contained or any of the other local neighborhood associations in the area with whom I have spoken. It was not the Seven Locks PTA (*the President testified to the Board of Education on March 3, 2004 that "The Seven Locks PTA opposes surplusing any MCPS school property at this time in Montgomery County and especially in the Churchill area"*). We immediately wrote a letter to Superintendent Weast and the Board of Education (*with a copy to the County Council*) saying the Superintendent's belief is wrong, and the community would not support his plan to surplus the Seven Locks site. Is Dr. Weast credible on this issue?

The community does not support the surplus of MCPS Kendale/Seven Locks, Brickyard, and Edson properties.

- The MCPS projects a 1,515 increase in student enrollment in FY05. With Montgomery County having its highest birth rate in over 100 years (*source: MCPS FY05 Capital Budget*), we would expect more students to enter the county to stress the already overcrowded current schools.
- According to the MCPS Director, Department of Planning and Capital Programming (*Joseph Lavorgna*), over 17,225 students in Montgomery County are in relocatable classrooms. We understand that involves 689 trailers in Montgomery County, including 19 trailer classrooms in 5 elementary schools and 8 trailers in middle schools in the Churchill High School Cluster (*MCPS Capital Budget*) where the Superintendent of Schools recently recommended three MCPS sites be declared "surplus," and the Board of Education on March 22 suggested further evaluation.
- Number of students attending private schools may decrease if economic conditions change, increasing enrollment at public schools; also in-fill development is occurring as houses are being enlarged to provide more space for families
- The MCPS only makes student projections for five to seven years, but wants to use that data to make decisions to surplus property that has been held (*in "trust" for future students*) for over a quarter of a century. Making irrevocable decisions with a 20-40 year impact with only 5 years of data seems rash or at least imprudent.