

IT'S OUR BACK YARD

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, Education Committee, MCCF

Sometimes a civic activist goes to so many meetings s/he can't keep them straight; so please bear with me. When I testified before the Board of Education on November 10, regarding the proposed Capital Budget for 2007 (and the CIP for 2007-2112), one of the points I made was to restate the Civic Federation's strong opposition to the decision to build a new elementary school on the Kendale Road site, rather than upgrade the existing Seven Locks ES. To quote myself: "...You have heard the various objections to this decision many times over, so I will not repeat them here, except to state that they all seem to us to remain valid and we have not heard them satisfactorily rebutted. I wish to make only one additional point: if the new school costs even a modest amount more than would the upgrade of the old school, the cost will be paid mainly via the borrowing of money - as are all construction costs. And that additional borrowing constitutes an additional debt, a debt that is paid down each year as part of the operating budget. When we testify before you about the FY2007 operating budget, we will certainly be discussing the MCPS debt service and how better uses might be found for any dollars spent on debt, especially extra debt incurred because of unwise decisions such as the one you persist in making regarding the Seven Locks ES situation."

If you want to know more about this issue, you can check out the Civic Fed website (<http://www.montgomerycivic.org/index.asp>) or that of the Save Seven Locks Coalition (<http://www.save7locksschool.org/>). If you've been following the discourse it will not surprise you to learn that at least some of us have been labelled NIMBYs. [No one can be a self-respecting civic activist these days without being called a NIMBY at least once!] My usual response (if I even bother responding) is that the issue/location is NOT in my back yard; after all, the Seven Locks battle is being played out in Potomac and I live in Kensington Heights. But my REAL response is that this is a matter of OUR back yard, because it affects everyone in Montgomery County!

Which brings me to the testimony I heard on November 8, when the County Council held its hearing on the issue of the conditions under which Private Institutional Facilities (PIFs) can develop land in the Agricultural Reserve. You can learn more about the PIF issue on our website. To grossly simplify (why not?!), this pits environmentalists (who want to protect the Ag reserve) against the faith-based community (who want to have more space for the facilities they need to serve their constituency). You can probably guess where I stand, even without looking on the Civic Fed website for the position we take. But I digress, albeit just a little. I was especially struck by the testimony of the representative of one coalition of faith-based groups who argued that, while such groups had a mission to serve their constituencies, they do NOT have an absolute right to use up the earth to achieve this mission. As he put it, they also have an obligation to preserve natural resources for all creatures, human and other. Or, to put it in my terms, the Ag reserve is everybody's back yard.

Which brings me back to the Seven Locks ES issue. Despite any protestations to the contrary, what brought us to this point was the suggestion by our County Executive that "unneeded" properties should be used to build workforce housing. This was followed by the recommendation of our Superintendent of Schools that there were several such "unneeded" parcels in the MCPS inventory. And this was followed by the decision of MCPS and the Board of Education that it would be better to build a new school on the Kendale Road site, which just might make the Seven Locks ES site "unneeded". The debate continues on so many fronts. Is it more expensive to build a new school than upgrade the old one? What is really planned for the old school site? How much of this reflects the need for more housing and how much is related to the needs of the development community. What about the need to get rid of those portables? But two questions have drifted down to the bottom of the list. What is the wisest thing to do in order to provide the best education for all our children? And how much growth can our county tolerate?

As we approach "build-out" in Montgomery County, we have to make some difficult decisions. About how we use (or abuse) our world. And we do this as a democratic society. We vote. Not just for elected officials, but also by the way we live. We vote by our choices of the cars we drive, the houses we build (mansions or modest), and where we build them. Not just the houses we live in, but the houses of faith (mega-churches or chapels), and the schools. And by these votes, we educate. We educate not just one another, but also - and most importantly - our children. I hope that we educate them to understand that it is all OUR back yard.

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