

November 11, 2010

**Testimony on the Superintendent's Recommended
FY 2012 Capital Budget and
Amendments to the FY 2011 – 2016 Capital Improvements Program
Before the Montgomery County Board of Education**

Richard Montgomery High School Cluster

***Richard Montgomery H.S.; Julius West M.S.; Beall E.S.;
College Gardens E.S.; Ritchie Park E.S.; Twinbrook E.S.***

Cheryl Moss Herman, Co-Cluster Coordinator

Good evening President O'Neill, Vice President Barclay, Members of the Board and Dr. Weast, my name is Cheryl Moss Herman and I am one of the Richard Montgomery Cluster Coordinators, along with Cheryl Peirce and Christopher Kelly.

As Dr. Weast noted in his press release of October 27, our cluster "is seen by many as a great place for families to live and send their child to school." We wholeheartedly agree. Our excellent and diverse schools, including the tri-level IB program and the Chinese Immersion program, draw people to our cluster. Our community strongly supports our children – and our schools.

We expected to testify today, armed with statistics and stories, in order to convince you that the RM cluster had grown and is going to continue to grow. We expected to share with you that in addition to turnover of older neighborhoods, changing demographics and living patterns, and some new development, have all contributed to our over capacity schools.

We are glad we don't have to do that.

We know that the numbers speak for themselves – the cluster elementary school utilization rate is at 122% now and is expected to rise to over 130% by 2012. Our middle school utilization at Julius West will also be over 130% during the six-year planning period, as the wave of elementary enrollment progresses.

In addition, future County growth plans that focus development near Metro stations affect our cluster. We are also concerned about projected growth just outside the borders of our cluster, such as the "Science City" development, and the impact it would have on student enrollment.

All school buildings that comprise the Richard Montgomery cluster are within the City of Rockville. The City's adequate public facilities school test resulted in all of the RM cluster elementary school areas being placed in a residential moratorium this year.

But for the approval of a generic eight-classroom addition that was added by the County Council to the FY 2011-2016 CIP last spring, the RM cluster would be in County residential moratorium next year. While the County Council's so-called "RM Cluster ES Solution" does address its moratorium issue, it remains merely a "paper solution" for our cluster.

Overcrowded schools and inadequate facilities hinder student learning and achievement. It is time now to find a way to manage our growth while providing safe, secure and modern learning facilities for our students, and to turn that paper solution into a bricks and mortar solution...with desks and chairs, teachers, modern technology and other resources to follow.

We are pleased to see that Dr. Weast recommended additional capacity for several RM cluster schools at both the elementary and middle school levels to accommodate our growing numbers.

The Richard Montgomery Cluster PTAs support approval of the recommended feasibility studies for an addition at Julius West Middle School and a new elementary school #5 at the Hungerford Park Site, so these studies -- and the process of providing relief for our cluster - - may begin immediately.

Moreover, we are pleased that both Beall and Twinbrook elementary schools are currently in the feasibility planning stages for additions. We remind you that Ritchie Park completed a feasibility study for an addition last year.

Going forward, the Superintendent recommended that these studies be used to develop a comprehensive plan to address our elementary school capacity needs as part of the FY 2013-2018 CIP. He also noted that the magnitude of the space deficits indicate that one or more elementary additions may also be needed.

Members of the Board, the recommendations for the CIP were released just two weeks ago. The traditional two-week period between announcement of the proposed CIP and the date we are to stand here and testify is barely enough to educate ourselves, let alone the thousands of families in our cluster, and to hold serious, meaningful discussions about the impacts -- intended and otherwise -- on our cluster. Two of our four elementary PTAs had meetings only Tuesday of this week and yesterday. This left no time for follow-up on questions and substantial discussion.

Given that, the views we provide today should be considered only the start of what we hope will be a continuing dialogue with you and MCPS staff about the Cluster's future plans, with ample opportunities for future community input in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

Our communities have been actively participating in each of the individual feasibility studies; we also expect community participation in the two new feasibility studies to be initiated this year.

However, we need an expanded role in shaping the comprehensive plan that will be prepared next summer in preparation for the full CIP next fall. We view the selection of where additional capacity will be added as the first decision regarding seats in our cluster that will culminate in a boundary study to be conducted once the new school construction begins.

We know that there is no “off-the-shelf” plan for this kind of community input, but we think that parallels the fact that there is no “off-the-shelf” answer for managing the over capacity in our schools. We want to work with you to shape a process for this continuous dialogue, and we wonder if some experience with Roundtable Advisory Committees or Discussion Groups could be used as a starting place. We need to be able to prepare for such discussions before the school year ends so that meaningful input can be provided during the summer months when the feasibility studies are finished.

Also, as you know, the feasibility studies can identify capital deficiencies at a school in addition to recommending classroom additions. We want to ensure that these deficiencies – from HVAC issues to cafeteria capacity to security needs to instrumental music spaces – are not overlooked for schools that are not selected for additions.

Beyond supporting the feasibility studies and greater community involvement, we find ourselves stuck firmly in clichés – that is, the saying that “Where you stand on an issue depends upon where you sit” and the adage that “The devil is in the details.” Each elementary school has a slightly different perspective – as you would expect.

Beall Elementary, a class size reduction focus school has had relocatable classrooms since 1999, and now uses a total of eight that cover a large portion of its playground space. With the highest percentage of over utilization at about 137% and projections to be at a startling almost 160% utilization rate and 300 students over during the six-year CIP, the focus at Beall is on bringing this school to its program capacity and upgrading its facilities. Beall has had to make many adjustments in the school day, including changing dismissal and traffic patterns, and hosting six lunch periods with staggered starts every 15 minutes between 11:30 am and 1:15 pm, just to get through the day. They should not have to do that.

Ritchie Park, the smallest school building in our cluster, is at 133% utilization and has five portables covering most of its playground blacktop. Blacktop-only recess is only possible on the blacktop next to the portables and can be disruptive to the classes out there. During the six-year CIP, Ritchie Park is projected to reach over 150% of its capacity. Teaching teams have been split, and bathroom breaks engineered into the school day for third graders in the portables to maximize instructional time and safety. Ritchie Park also has four lunch periods and its use of every available space for teachers leaves very little space that can be used by after-school programs, thus, their offerings in this regard are few. With the feasibility study completed last year and projected needs so great, the Ritchie Park community was hoping to secure addition funding as early as this amendment year. So the Superintendent’s recommendation is viewed as a “delay” by some.

Twinbrook Elementary School, a Title I school, is the oldest building in our cluster. It was “modernized” in 1986, but not to modern standards. Its physical needs are great and it will be given a FACT assessment for modernization this year. We look forward to reviewing the final methodology and scoring rubric for FACT assessments. Unfortunately, the modernization queue is longer than the capacity addition queue, so many in the Twinbrook community feel that their needs are being ignored while a new school may be built. The cafeteria/all purpose room must be updated because the current serving area is too small

for the large percentage of children who eat a food services lunch. Additional challenges are ADA compliance, including an elevator installation. Currently, access for people who have mobility challenges to parts of the school is only available by exiting and then re-entering the building, and teachers must shuffle classrooms each year to maintain program standards for a student who uses a wheelchair. This latter challenge is also present at Beall. Overall, Twinbrook is concerned about equity across the cluster – that children in their elementary school have the same access to facilities, technology and safe places to learn.

College Gardens, which was newly modernized in 2008, is already over capacity and in need of portables, as you know. College Gardens' core is so crowded that they have five lunch periods this year, which make scheduling of other activities, such as chorus and assemblies challenging. The Superintendent recommended that the Chinese Immersion program be moved to the new school once it is built to free up seats at College Gardens. Many in the home school community support this idea, hoping to minimize future boundary changes, but the CI community has some significant concerns about the impact on their program and their community. You will hear more from the College Gardens PTA President later tonight. We also question whether relocation of that program will actually solve College Gardens over capacity situation, especially if that community continues to grow.

Finally, the cluster is concerned that an addition at Julius West may not fully address the middle school capacity needs of the cluster, or may result in a middle school enrollment capacity that is just too large. We encourage you to consider more options for our middle school capacity challenge, and we look forward to working with you on this – sooner, rather than later.

Regarding the overall CIP amendments, we support keeping restroom renovations – four in our cluster – on track. We support countywide projects on HVAC, Roof Replacements, School Security upgrades, and PLAR, including increasing HVAC to \$15 million and increasing PLAR by \$1 million over the County Council's approved amount. We also want additional attention to tech mods so that appropriate technology is in place to support the new curriculum fully and our children, most of whom are in schools where technology was provided based on much smaller enrollment figures, have the technology needed to succeed.

To summarize – the Richard Montgomery Cluster PTAs fully support the decisions that need to be made now – approval of the feasibility studies for the new elementary school and for JW. We also support a continuous dialogue between MCPS and the community regarding the “comprehensive solution” that includes possible new additions, a proposal to move the CI program, alternate capacity solutions for middle school, and further out, a cluster-wide boundary study for the new school.

We clearly share a commonality in purpose and look forward to working with you to provide this relief and move forward for our children. Thank you.