

**Testimony on the Superintendent's Recommended
FY 2013 Capital Budget and the FY 2013-2018 Capital Improvements Program
before the Montgomery County Board of Education**

November 14, 2011

**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.***

Presented by
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Last year, I held up a Hungerford Park Elementary School pillow as a way to show support for construction of a new elementary school at the site of the old Hungerford Park school. After the hearing, I realized that to the parent who loaned the pillow to me, it meant something more. It is a cozy reminder of her schooldays and childhood. Sometimes we need to be reminded that schools are an important part of community identity. Both the sea of spirit wear here tonight and this Hungerford pillow are, literally, symbolic of the fabric of our community. We need to remember that the CIP decisions we are discussing tonight go far beyond the enrollment and dollar figures and will shape that fabric in our community.

Good evening President Barclay and members of the Board. Welcome Dr. Starr. My name is Cheryl Moss Herman and I am a Richard Montgomery Cluster coordinator, along with Cheryl Peirce. On behalf of the more than 1500 members of the PTAs and PTSAs of the Richard Montgomery Cluster, I thank you for this opportunity to advocate for the significant capital needs of our cluster.

One year ago, we shared our grave concerns about the over capacity situation in every one of our four elementary schools and the impact of that overcrowding on the learning environment. We also expressed concern that as these students “age up,” that wave of students would be headed to Julius West, our only middle school. Our elementary schools and our middle school are both projected to be over 120% capacity during the six-year CIP period, with one school, Ritchie Park, more than 40% over capacity.

We told you about play space that was encroached upon by villages of portables, we have 20 in our cluster now; about lunch periods that span from breakfast time to English tea time; about the nooks and crannies that are being repurposed as teaching spaces; and about the safety challenges of moving so many students in, out and around our buildings. Our teachers, staff and students are adapting to these challenges, but they surely have an impact on the educational environment and experience.

MCPS recognized the significant growth in our cluster – our elementary deficit was over 600 seats – and recommended a cluster-wide “comprehensive” approach that included consideration of three elementary additions, a possible new elementary school, and a feasibility study for an addition to Julius West. All of the feasibility studies have now been completed. Thank you to

the more than 100 members of our community – PTA members, our neighbors and elected officials – who participated in one or more feasibility study committee meetings in only a few short months. Thank you to the principals in our cluster, and the MCPS staff, who also provided significant support for the effort.

Tonight, I will talk first about our elementary school situation and then about our middle school challenges.

I am delighted to stand here tonight on behalf of the RM Cluster in full support of the proposed Richard Montgomery Elementary School #5 at the site of the former Hungerford Park Elementary School. We look forward to having this LEED-certified school open in our community for the 2015-2016 school year. When it becomes a reality in 2015, we hope it will bring all of our students back inside our buildings and off our play spaces, and improve the teaching and learning environment at all of our elementary schools. Not surprisingly, support for this school from parents in our cluster, as well as from the broader community, is strong. We look forward to working with MCPS throughout the funding, design, and construction phases.

Also not surprisingly, the prospect of a cluster-wide elementary boundary study brings some anxiety as it will likely result in elementary assignment changes for a large number of our families. The boundary study is scheduled for 2014, which seems to prolong the period of anxiety for our cluster. In particular, there are concerns that school assignment could affect the Chinese Immersion program or the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program for some students currently at College Gardens. From that perspective, the sooner program assignments and future boundaries are known, the better.

We know that conducting the study earlier increases the chances of error, as changes in enrollment from projections are very likely to occur. We understand that having the best enrollment data available makes for better boundary choices. We would like to stay in a dialogue with MCPS about the optimal timing for our boundary study. Although it is not really a CIP issue, but will be a concern when conducting the boundary study, we wonder if you have considered making RMES#5 an elementary IB school? We would like to explore that possibility with you as things move forward.

We cannot discuss RMES #5 without noting that we are especially pleased that discussions between MCPS staff and Montgomery County Department of General Services led to the decision not to recommend locating County-controlled office space as a fourth floor on top of this school. When this “co-location” proposal was evaluated by our community, the response was intensely negative and all four of our elementary PTAs approved resolutions against co-location of county offices at the Hungerford site. The Facility Advisory Committee for RMES #5 strongly supported the school-only option and the City of Rockville also approved a resolution against co-location of office space at this site. Thank you to Mr. James Song, Mr. Bruce Crispell, Ms. Adrienne Karamihas and the MCPS staff who heard the community and worked with the county Department of General Services to ensure that a school-only option went forward.

This co-location proposal stemmed from a county-wide initiative called Cross Agency Resource Sharing or CARS. In recognition of steadily diminishing resources in our County, the County is urging all agencies, MCPS included, to consider sharing resources where feasible to save taxpayer dollars across agency lines. In recognition that resource sharing is going to be the wave of the future, we urge MCPS and the Board to develop criteria that specifically addresses acceptable co-location and dual-use of schools and school property so that you are prepared to engage further with the County on CARS, as you undoubtedly will be asked to do. However, until you have criteria for co-location or dual-use in place, we urge you to proceed cautiously. We direct you to an MCCPTA-approved resolution that we have attached to our written testimony.

Last year, we also shared with you examples of the deteriorating condition of Twinbrook Elementary school. Twinbrook, built in 1952, added to six times over its nearly sixty years, but never fully modernized, was one of the small group of schools left out of the previous modernization assessments. We are pleased that Twinbrook was assessed this year and its modernization has been scheduled early in the next round, but we are concerned that “early” means January 2021. The FACT assessment identified numerous instructional space inadequacies and potential security and safety dangers, which we have summarized and attached to our written testimony. All safety and security issues should be addressed immediately and every effort made to identify ways to alleviate the space inadequacies between now and 2021. Due to the error of not including Twinbrook – and Damascus and Rosemary Hills – in the previous assessments, there are schools currently scheduled for modernization between now and 2021 whose conditions are not as poor as Twinbrook’s. Twinbrook is the only Title I school in our cluster, the only Title I school in our quint-cluster. We ask you to consider what message its condition, unaddressed for so many years, sends to the students and families of this school, as well as the students and families throughout our cluster.

Regarding middle school capacity issues, our community strongly supports adding capacity as soon as possible, but we have concerns about the current recommendation. The Superintendent has proposed a large addition to Julius West to be completed in August 2016. With a capacity of 1444, it would make JW the largest middle school in Montgomery County. The preferred range of enrollment for middle schools, according to Regulation FAA-RA, is 600-1200 students. One of our PTAs asked on their e-list how the community felt about a middle school that will be the size of some liberal arts colleges? It does make you think.

We know that with proper staffing and additional core space – guidance space, auxiliary gyms and a cafeteria seating and serving line expansion – a large school can be managed. At a recent PTA-hosted Community Forum on the CIP, the question came up regarding whether the proposed cafeteria expansion would go forward. The consensus? Feeding our students so they can perform their best, especially with a FARMS rate of almost 30%, is critical. Cafeteria expansion: Not Optional. We also note an add/alt proposal in the addition feasibility study for a new, more secure entrance to JW. Security is not optional either.

We are glad to see attention paid to our capacity needs at the middle school level and ask the Board to consider moving our proposed addition one year forward to 2015 in recognition that the school will already be 30% over capacity by 2015. We do note, however, that while our

community supports the addition, there are concerns related to the lack of flexibility for our cluster if enrollment projections turn out to be too low, as they have been in the recent past. We understand that “super-sizing” our middle school appears to be the best value. We’re hungry for space now, but we have a nagging feeling that we might later experience that same “pit of the stomach feeling” that we get from consuming a super-size meal. The broader question: Is MCPS prepared if enrollment in the RM Cluster grows more than projected?

Many of you know that the RM Cluster experienced dramatic, and unexpected, enrollment growth in recent years. That growth is, in fact, what brought us together to explore our cluster-wide solution and conduct five feasibility studies in the last eighteen months. With continued structural changes in our economy that may tilt the buy-versus-rent decision, older neighborhoods continuing to turnover, county growth policies that encourage denser development near metros, and discussions of development just outside the boundaries of our cluster – Science City, the White Flint sector, and the Twinbrook Metro area -- we remain concerned that enrollment will once again grow more quickly than projected, even within the 6-year CIP.

For our elementary schools, we believe that we do have flexibility to address future enrollment growth. We conducted feasibility studies at three of the four elementary schools and should enrollment be projected to grow beyond the capacity of our five schools, including RMES#5, we would look forward to revisiting the need for an addition at one or more of the schools. We also know that the Twinbrook modernization will give us another chance to explore capacity needs in the future.

However, flexibility in our middle school capacity seems elusive, and flexibility at the middle school level is really important, as some of the largest variations in enrollment projections have occurred at this level. We are currently planning for a 1444 student middle school and project an immediate attendance of 1331, leaving spare capacity of only 131 seats. If enrollment five years out grows by more than 9% from projections, we will open the school and be immediately over capacity. We know that has happened at other schools in the County and want to avoid that trap. Can we be certain that by 2016 deviations from current enrollment projections will not exceed 9%? We don’t think so. Consider where we’ve been:

- In the full FY11-16 CIP request two years ago, MCPS projected enrollment at JW to be 1175 at ten years out. In the amendment year that followed, and in the current FY13-18 CIP, the ten-year out projection is for 1400 students. That's a change in future projections of almost 20% in only two years.
- Looking at current middle school enrollment, we currently have 1094 students at JW. One year ago, in the FY2012 amendment year, MCPS projected there would be 1037 students at JW this year. That's a change of 5% in only one year. Looking back two years to the last full CIP, MCPS projected only 942 students at JW. So, we've had a 16% change in actual enrollment in only two years.

MCPS is now planning an addition at JW that has room for a margin of error, more than five years out, of only 9%.

- What is Plan B if we discover next year or the year after that our enrollment continues to grow more than projections indicate?
- What happens if we build the addition to JW and enrollment rises beyond current projections?
- What options would we have once we have a 1444 seat school?

This reminds us of a TV game show of the 70s – “Let’s Make a Deal.” We are presented with a spectacular set of prizes – a new school and a middle school addition. We can choose that...or trade it for what is behind Curtain #2. We have a proposed addition with an identified completion date but a concern that it may not solve our capacity issues – OR – we can look behind Curtain #2 for an unknown solution with an unknown budget and unknown timetable. Some in our community urged that we wholeheartedly support the package on the showroom floor – the middle school addition -- and re-visit capacity issues as they arise in the future. Others felt strongly that we had to raise our concerns about future capacity to be sure that you, as decision-makers, had considered all the options.

Last year in our testimony, we asked you to “talk to us, work with us” in the context of addressing capacity issues for our cluster. Our five feasibility studies focused primarily on what was architecturally feasible to meet “Ed Specs” for each site. They did not provide for holistic discussion of how to meet our cluster’s growing enrollment needs. We asked specifically for a roundtable discussion to discuss capacity, but were told there is no procedure for that; we would have to wait for the CIP in the fall of 2011. Bruce Crispell promised to make himself available to answer community questions about the CIP proposal and we thank both Bruce and our Community Superintendent, Donna Hollingshead, for joining more than eighty of us last week to do just that. But, we still did not get clarity about what may be behind Curtain #2 – or even if a Curtain #2 exists.

If it does, one of the options could be a second middle school for our cluster. An argument against planning for two 700-student middle schools is that with Julius West already having a program capacity of about 1000, we don’t need 700 new seats in our cluster. With the discussions we hear about space deficits around the county and the push for resource sharing in the County, is having surplus space at a middle school seconds off I-270 and minutes from the Beltway, Rte. 28, and the ICC a terrible problem for MCPS to have? Has there really been the “out of the box” thinking that could result in a win-win situation for our students and for MCPS?

While we support additional capacity no later than 2016, as provided by the proposed addition, we do think it prudent to also explore what may be behind Curtain #2.

Returning to priorities here in 2011, we request the following:

- While waiting for new school capacity to be built, we ask that the Change of School Assignment (COSA) process and other mechanisms that transfer students into and around the cluster be examined and kept to a minimum at over capacity schools.

- For Julius West, we ask that the sidewalk along the bus loop be widened. The burgeoning number of students who line up to wait for buses on this relatively narrow sidewalk is making for a potentially unsafe situation. The expression “accident waiting to happen” comes to mind.
- We request that restroom projects remain on schedule and that special attention be given to HVAC needs. For some schools in our cluster, the band-aids on our systems are just not working and temperature extremes are affecting the learning environment.
- We do not support the Superintendent’s recommendation to delay modernizations. Our community knows from our experience with delays to the modernization of Richard Montgomery High School that such delays are costly.
- We are also concerned about access to technology. We appreciate that the new curriculum is challenging to implement and we worry that it is even more challenging in over capacity schools that are already straining to manage limited technological resources.
- We fully support the MCCPTA Resolution on the FY 2013 Capital Budget and FY 2013-2018 CIP, adopted October 25, 2011, and the testimony of MCCPTA President Kristin Tribble, on November 10, 2011.

In conclusion, we thank you for your attention to our cluster. We look forward to working with you on the construction of our sorely needed new elementary school. We look forward to the long overdue modernization of Twinbrook Elementary School; please ensure that the already long off January 2021 completion date does not slip.

Finally, we hope to move forward with construction of middle school capacity. We also want to ensure that current choices address our future capacity needs. None of us wants to play “Let’s Make a Deal” and gamble with our kids’ future, nor do we want that awful feeling in the pit of our stomachs after we have been seduced by the value of super-sizing.

We say what we did last year – talk to us, work with us.

We look forward to ensuring that the teaching and learning spaces we create in the near future will endure as the fabric of our community for years to come.

Thank you.

Attachments:

MCCPTA Resolution on Co-location

Twinbrook Safety, Security, & Instructional Space Issues