

"Federation Corner" column  
The Montgomery Sentinel - May 13, 2004

### **Politics and schools mix again, and we all lose**

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We would probably like to believe that the education of our children is not a political football, but we know that politics all too frequently impacts how Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) does business. This is yet another example. In case you hadn't heard, the Board of Education (BoE) has been discussing turning over "unneeded" school sites to the county so these sites can be used to construct "workforce housing." The details are a bit muddy (aren't they always?!) and the sequence of events is complex (ditto), but here's an overly-simplified synopsis.

In October, 2003, our County Executive (Mr. Duncan) contacted our Superintendent of Schools (Dr. Weast) and requested that the BoE declare three undeveloped sites owned by MCPS as un-needed, thus allowing the transfer of these sites to the county for use in development of "affordable housing."

The three sites in question (Brickyard Road, Kendale Road, and Edson Lane) are part of the real property list under the control of the MCPS. The housing that these sites would be used to develop is called "affordable housing" or "workforce housing" (to distinguish it from MPDUs) and is intended to increase the extremely limited number of housing units that can be "afforded" by such public servants as teachers; police, fire, and rescue workers, and other county employees whose salaries are so low that they have been priced out of Montgomery County's expensive housing market.

In late February of this year Dr. Weast sent a set of recommendations to the BoE regarding Mr. Duncan's request and the sites in question. Without going into details, I summarized Dr. Weast's memorandum (I have a copy and you can obtain one from the MCPS Office of Community Affairs) as saying that none of the sites is needed at this time and that it is unlikely that any would be needed in the foreseeable future. He proposed either using the sites to or transferring them to the county (for affordable housing) in return for funding of MCPS projects that are currently low on the County Executive's priority list.

On March 3 the BoE held a public hearing, most of which was devoted to testimony regarding the three un-needed sites. There is considerable controversy as to how this hearing came about.

Dr. Weast and the BoE contend that the hearing was part of the normal process by which community input is gathered on such matters. Many citizens contend that there was an effort to "hide" the site negotiations from the public and that the hearing came about only because some citizens became aware of what was going on "behind closed doors" and demanded that the public be heard.

The hearing was heavily attended and Dr. Weast and BoE members listened to several hours of testimony by irate parents and others who oppose the transfer of the sites. The points they made can be summarized as:

a. Our schools are badly overcrowded; we need more schools; and land is too valuable to ever justify giving up MCPS property for any use other than schools.

b. MCPS ability to predict what will be needed is highly questionable, whether one is projecting short-term or long-term.

c. MCPS is in the education business, not the housing business.

d. People are tired of back-door politics; Dr. Weast and members of the Board are employed by citizens of Montgomery County and should be forthcoming with the public about all such matters.

You get the idea.

In late March, Dr. Weast sent to the Board a modified set of recommendations. The Board accepted these, with some modifications. Again, the details are fairly complex but the bottom line is that MCPS did not reject Mr. Duncan's request, but proposed a number of studies and negotiations directed at (a) fully exploring if the sites might be used for school needs and (b) carefully working with the Executive (and the County Council) to determine how transfer of one or more of the sites could be used to leverage more funds for needed MCPS projects. Again, some of this material is available from MCPS, but full details of the BoE deliberations were not available when I last checked.

If you are not already exhausted with reading this report, let me make some observations, each of which is, admittedly, my opinion:

A. I find it outrageous that Mr. Duncan proposed this "use" of MCPS properties and equally outrageous that the Superintendent and the Board did not, after due deliberation, reject it. The position that Dr. Weast has taken is a very politic one. There is in his memoranda a worrisome hint of concern that, if the Board does not co-operate with the Executive, the Executive might find it difficult to meet MCPS needs: a very politic line of thought.

B. It is lamentable, but understandable, that many citizens do not trust Dr. Weast, the BoE, or Mr. Duncan, to be open and honest about such matters.

C. Given the abysmal record of the Duncan administration (as well as the County Council and the Planning Board) with respect to MPDUs, it is almost laughable that there is an ongoing dialogue about transferring MCPS land to the county in the hope that it will be used to provide much needed affordable housing.

D. If we as a county feel that our public employees (including teachers) need help in finding affordable housing within the county, we should discuss mechanisms OTHER than divesting MCPS of land to provide such housing help. What about direct housing subsidies such as those routinely given to corporate executives, members of the Armed Services, etc.? Or what about raising the salaries of county workers so they can afford to live in the county? I could elaborate on these ideas and perhaps you can come up with others, many of which might be better.

E. Unfortunately, I doubt that we have heard the last of the idea of using MCPS property for affordable housing. The MCF Education Committee will be bringing a resolution

regarding this issue to a vote at the May federation meeting. In the interim, I urge you to contact Dr. Weast, Members of the Board of Education, and other elected officials, to let them know your opinion in this matter.

And if, as I fear, we are unable to slay this particular dragon, I submit that the only logical next step to take is to insist that any land so transferred be used to build affordable housing and ONLY affordable housing: in short that each and every housing unit constructed on such land be sold/rented ONLY to county employees who are judged to be in need of our support so that they can live within the boundaries of the county they serve.