

If Not Kendale, Then What?

Task force considers alternatives for capacity relief, but parents decried a 'divide and conquer' strategy.

By Ken Millstone The Almanac

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The Montgomery County Council affirmed March 28 that it will not fund the construction of an elementary school on Kendale Road in Potomac — an outcome that was nearly inconceivable three months ago.

The Council agreed informally to no longer consider building on Kendale but decided not to vote on the issue, according to Patrick Lacefield, a Council spokesman.

Montgomery County Public Schools formulated the Kendale Road plan in early 2004 as a solution to overcrowding at Potomac Elementary School. The new school on Kendale would have replaced nearby Seven Locks Elementary School, which had previously been slated for an addition and modernization.

MCPS stood by the Kendale plan even after a February report by the Montgomery County Office of Inspector General found that the school system had misrepresented cost data and community sentiment in proposing the new school and that two less-costly options had been artificially ruled out.

The Council discussion Tuesday came one week after its second public hearing this month on a whirlwind of Potomac school issues with Seven Locks Elementary School at its nexus. Some 30 speakers at that hearing unanimously supported a motion by Councilmember Howard Denis to build a larger Seven Locks at its current site, transferring funding from the now-defunct Kendale plan.

The Council appears to be moving swiftly toward approving a new plan to relieve elementary school overcrowding in the Winston Churchill High School cluster — the original intent of the Kendale school proposal — ahead of the budget negotiations that will consume the next two months.

"Everyone understands that Kendale is just not workable," said Ken Hartman, a Denis staffer and member of a joint Montgomery County Public Schools-County Council task force appointed to examine capacity solutions for the cluster. "It's just reality, the facts on the ground. There really is no chance that Kendale could come back as a full option."

Hartman added that Kendale is "always there," at least as a point of comparison, because it is fully developed and priced out.

But Denis' plan, a Capital Improvements Program amendment that would require six Council votes to pass, is now the apparent frontrunner for relieving overcrowding quickly. Potomac Elementary School is about 20 percent over-capacity and Bells Mill Elementary is nearly 50 percent over capacity. At Bells Mill, students and staff members have had serious illnesses attributed to mold in portable classrooms. The March 21 hearing included both PTA and civic leaders who have been continuously involved in the three-year-old debate about Seven Locks and Kendale and a large number of newcomers who said that they had only recently woken up to the seriousness of the elementary school situation.

"The future of Seven Locks now dominates the discussion in my neighborhood, whereas it did not do that before," said Tim Hando, a Seven Locks neighbor with three children under age 5. "Everyone I have spoken with is unanimously opposed to the Kendale site and would like this drama to end."



Photo by Ken Millstone: The Almanac Bells Mill Elementary School parents held up "Help Bells Mill" signs at a March 21 County Council hearing on elementary school overcrowding in the Winston Churchill High School cluster. Others had signs that said "Save Seven Locks," "Fix Potomac" and "Potomac ES Needs Relief."

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Another new speaker at the hearing was Neil McMullen, a Kendale Road resident and economist, who applied a cost-benefit analysis to the Kendale school and Seven Locks rebuild alternatives.

"There are all of these ... dimensions of a good school which are preponderantly on the side of Seven Locks in terms of the benefits, preponderantly on the side of Kendale in terms of the costs," McMullen said. He cited not only safety, parking, and environmental concerns, but also future liabilities at the Kendale site, where he said flooding will exacerbate existing dangers on the steep, narrow road. "The point at which it runs across the road is a blind curve where accidents already occur," he said. "What you are setting up is a tort lawyer's dream."

Several speakers shot back sharply at an MCPS memo released a day earlier that raised two overcrowding solutions anathema to area parents. One was to close Seven Locks Elementary School and operate with only four elementary schools in the cluster. The other was to include Carderock Springs Elementary — a Walt Whitman High School cluster school — in the reshuffling.

Whitman cluster coordinator Deborah Demille-Wagman said that her community learned about the Carderock option by chance at a Board of Education meeting. She warned against drawing Whitman into the already bitter Churchill cluster fight.

"You are in a position to ensure that more fuel is not thrown into this already blazing fire," Demille-Wagman said. "Already our community is up in arms. ... Overcrowding in the Churchill cluster cannot be cured by increasing the overcrowding in the Whitman cluster."

The Council agreed March 28 not pursue the Carderock Springs option further.

But speakers at the hearing increasingly called MCPS to task for what they called an antagonistic, "divide and conquer" attitude.

"It's almost like a scorched earth policy. I don't understand what the board is doing," said Mark Adelman, chair of the Montgomery County Civic Federation's Education Committee. "The minute you are perceived to be threatening that one school is going to be closed ... you're sending a message to the citizens whose kids go to that school that there's going to be retribution."

Adelman said he feared that the school system is digging in its heels over a single issue rather than focusing on global principles.

"We ask honest questions expecting honest answers and we get misinformation, disinformation and lies," said Seven Locks parent Michael Waller.

Council Education Committee Chairman Michael Subin (D-At Large) stared directly at Waller during councilmember comments on the testimony.

"Demeaning other folks and putting negative labels on them is simply getting people to dig their heels in. It's not helping. If we care about the kids, let's address the policy issues," he said.

Subin then turned off his microphone and asked Waller if he wanted to "take this outside."