

Council to vote on Seven Locks solution today

Education Committee offers last-minute plan to replace Bells Mill

Wednesday, May 17, 2006

County Council members today will try to end three months of deliberations by voting on a solution to reduce overcrowding in the Churchill school cluster, either with a replacement for Seven Locks Elementary School, a replacement for Bells Mill Elementary School or a late-breaking alternative plan.

On Thursday, the full council voted 6-3 to reject Kendale Road in Potomac as the site for a new Seven Locks Elementary, going against the recommendations of the county school board and the council's Education Committee.

Almost immediately following that vote, council staffers worked on developing alternatives that could relieve the cluster's overcrowded schools and craft a political solution agreeable to council members, school board members and the community.

On Tuesday, the council's Education Committee voted 2-1 to recommend a new proposal, pitched by schools Superintendent Jerry D. Weast and school board President Charles Haughey (At large) of Rockville: Build a new school at the Bells Mill Elementary site by July 2009, a year earlier than planned.

Councilman Howard A. Denis said he voted against the proposal because he is not sure of the school board's commitment to keeping Seven Locks open.

"I voted against it because there are too many blank spaces," said Denis (R-Dist. 1) of Chevy Chase. "I want to see it in writing. It's a trust-but-verify situation."

Weast said the school board is committed to keeping Seven Locks open. In November, the board recommended that the county not surplus the Seven Locks site over the next six years, no matter what happens with the replacement school project.

"We hope to have a compromise," Weast said Tuesday. "We know that that it will not please everybody, but we hope it will address Mr. Denis' concerns, the community's concerns and your concerns."

"It's hard for the community to have confidence in that, given the record of now six years of changes for Seven Locks," said Sandy Vogelgesang, who heads the Seven Locks Coalition, which comprises eight neighborhood associations calling for Seven Locks to remain at its current site.

A Seven Locks modernization would not be completed until December 2011 under the proposal recommended by the Education Committee.

The fact that the school board's proposal does not address Seven Locks until the last years of the school system's six-year construction plan has community members worried that the board is "not serious about keeping Seven Locks as a school," Vogelgesang said.

Denis has pushed a proposal to rebuild a Seven Locks replacement school for 640 students on its existing site. He said he would call for a full council vote on his proposal today.

Last week, Denis introduced the proposal as an amendment to the county's fiscal 2005-2010 construction plan. The proposal failed to receive the six votes required for budget amendments.

But, late last week, the proposal appeared to have the five votes needed to make it part of the 2007-2012 construction plan.

After the Education Committee's latest recommendation on Tuesday, Denis would not speak publicly about where his colleagues stood on his proposal to rebuild Seven Locks where it stands. Privately, supporters of the plan said it had the five votes needed for council approval today.

Under the Education Committee's rival recommendation, a new Bells Mill could take the Seven Locks design envisioned for Kendale Road and adapt it to the Bells Mill site on Bells Mill Road. It would serve 618 students, with the ability to expand to serve as many as 740.

Under the plan, Bells Mill would move to the Grosvenor Center holding school in Bethesda in December 2007.

Bells Mill's current enrollment of 464 students is 50 percent over the building's capacity and requires eight portables, which parents have complained are in poor condition.

Upon completion of a Bells Mill replacement, some students from Potomac Elementary would go to Bells Mill, relieving overcrowding at Potomac, which could be 110 students over capacity by the 2009-2010 school year.

In 2004, the council approved \$14 million to build a replacement Seven Locks on Kendale Road as a way to move some students out of the crowded Potomac Elementary. Last week's 6-3 vote killed that plan.