

## Officials Agree on Expansion in Potomac

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The Montgomery County Council unanimously approved a deal yesterday that will ease crowding at Potomac area elementary schools by expediting construction of one and expanding another, ending an unusually contentious spat between the county and the school board.

"The war is over, and it is time for magnanimity and peace," said council member Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac-Bethesda), who, along with Superintendent Jerry D. Weast, helped craft the final agreement.

Under the plan approved yesterday, construction of a new Bells Mill Elementary School will begin in December 2007, a year earlier than planned, and be completed by July 2009. As many as eight classrooms and a gym are to be built at nearby Seven Locks Elementary School by 2011. And at nearby Potomac Elementary School, portables with maintenance problems will be replaced this summer, and bathroom renovations will be moved up a year, from 2007.

In addition, the plan calls for one study to determine what other renovations or additions might be required at Potomac Elementary and one to address possible boundary changes at the three schools.

The deal comes after months of conflict

over the role of the County Council in school construction projects.

Yesterday it was all smiles and conciliatory speeches in the council's seventh-floor chambers — a far cry from earlier meetings on how best to alleviate crowding in the Potomac area.

Despite staunch opposition from a majority of County Council members and many in the community, school system officials had pushed a plan to construct a 640-student elementary school on Kendale Road to replace the 350-student Seven Locks campus 1½ miles away. Debate at a meeting last week became so heated that council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) threatened to call security on school board member Stephen N. Abrams (Rockville-Potomac) after he spoke out of turn.

But after the County Council killed funding for the Kendale plan by a vote of 6 to 3, school officials were forced to come up with an alternative.

"I think there was a moment when everyone was digging their heels in," said school board member Patricia O'Neill (Bethesda-Chevy Chase). "But compromise and moving forward is what good government is all about."

No additional funding beyond the \$32.8 million allocated for the Kendale project will be required under the new plan, officials said.

Several council members alluded to last Thursday's contentious meeting in their remarks yesterday.

"This has been neither the County Council's nor the school board's finest hour," said council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring).

But even as school board and council members spoke in conciliatory terms, Leventhal offered some words of caution. "The fact that we have an excellent school system does not mean we shouldn't ask questions about it," he said, adding that no institution — not the school board or the County Council — is above scrutiny.

One factor that helped doom the Kendale plan was a report in February by the county's independent inspector general, Thomas Dagley. The school system contended that Dagley had no authority to investigate its operations, but Leventhal said the County Council will submit a brief to the attorney general taking the opposite stance.

For their part, parents of elementary school children in the Potomac area were pleased with the final agreement.

"We needed relief, and we believe we were heard by our public officials," said Richard Rosenthal, president of the Bells Mill PTA, which has had to contend with crowding and moldy portables. "We're relieved the two bodies were able to reach a compromise."