

## Seven Locks School Fight: The Final Score

*The Montgomery County Council and school officials last week agreed on a plan to ease overcrowding at Potomac area elementary schools, ending an unusual conflict between the county and school board over school construction projects. The council approved a plan to begin construction of a new Bells Mill Elementary School a year earlier than planned; additional classrooms and a gym are to be built at Seven Locks Elementary School; and portable classrooms will be replaced at Potomac Elementary School. The council and neighborhood residents opposed a plan to build a new school on Kendale Road to replace Seven Locks Elementary.*

*Jay M. Weinstein, 45, of Bethesda, was one of the residents who fought the school board's initial plans, as a member of the loosely formed Save Seven Locks School Coalition. Weinstein, who has a son at Seven Locks, owns an investment firm. In a piece expressing the views of the coalition, he writes about how the controversy*

*has shaped neighborhood opinions of how government works.*

By JAY M. WEINSTEIN

In March 2004, I was happily indulging my lifelong passion for civic non-activism. Then my good friend Livleen Gill (future PTA president of Seven Locks Elementary School) called with the astonishing news that after years of planning a modernization of Seven Locks Elementary School, the Board of Education and School Superintendent Jerry Weast had reversed course 180 degrees. The new plan was to build a new school at a site on Kendale Road, close Seven Locks at the current site at Bradley Boulevard and Seven Locks Road, and make that property surplus to transfer to the county for an affordable housing initiative.

"Impossible," I said. "That's the dumbest idea I have ever heard." But it was true. In a county where all anyone talks about is traffic and education, this bold stroke promised to make both of them worse.

Now, two years later, the Save

Seven Locks Coalition has received a civic activism award from the Montgomery County Civic Federation for exposing problems at the Montgomery County public school system and the Board of Education. In a virtually unprecedented move, the County Council refused additional funding for the Kendale school despite the insistence of Weast and a majority of the Board of Education. To avoid the uncharted legal waters of governmental authority that this stalemate would have created, the council, the school system and the Churchill High School cluster community finally agreed on a plan that enlarges Seven Locks at the current site and provides overcrowding relief to Potomac and Bells Mill elementary schools.

After two years of lobbying, thousands of volunteer hours, nearly unanimous testimony against the plan by more than 100 citizens, a picketing of a Board of Education meeting, an unprecedented criticism of the school system and the

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## Some Lasting Lessons Learned in the Seven Locks School Fight

Board of Education by the county's inspector general and testifying at dozens of public hearings, we accomplished our goal of saving the school. The council was effusive in its praise for the persistence of the community in bringing this problem to light and carrying it through.

Who were the heroes and villains? And what lessons can citizens and public officials learn from the saga of our little band of rebels?

### Lessons Learned

- 1) You can take on City Hall and

win, even against the greatest odds. But you need lots of people — persistent people, diligent people, irrepresible people. We were lucky, but as they say, luck is the residue of hard work.

2) Although everyone has an opinion about presidents and governors, even the most conscientious citizens have no clue whom to vote for in county and school board elections.

The paradox is, decisions by local officials are infinitely more likely to directly affect voters than anything George W. Bush does.

3) Government officials must remember that constituents are not

their enemies; they are their friends. They cannot assume the competence, fairness or honesty of other governmental agencies when challenged by respectable citizens.

### Heroes

1) School board members Valerie Ervin and Nancy Navarro. Ervin and Navarro became our strong advocates, and I hope they will lead a new, responsive Board of Education after the elections. Navarro is on the ballot this year and should be supported.

2) The Montgomery County Council. Once council members realized the gravity of the issues, they

took their responsibility as public officials seriously. We got a fair hearing from eight of the nine members. Special praise must go to Council President George Leventhal, Marilyn Praisner, Howard Denis, and Denis staff members Jennifer Hughes and Ken Hartman for their remarkable efforts.

3) The community. Led by Cyril Draffin, Gill and Sandy Vogelgesang, dozens of people contributed to what was truly a group effort.

### Villains

1) Jerry Weast. Weast is a skilled politician and architect of this fiasco. He is the highest-paid employee

in the county and oversees half your tax dollars. Why he would ruin his reputation on this comparatively small matter remains beyond all of us.

2) Most of the school board. In our view, the behavior of Sharon Cox, Steve Abrams and Pat O'Neill during this process was disgraceful. O'Neill is up for reelection this year, Abrams and Cox in 2008. They won't get our vote. Although personally inoffensive, Charles Haughey and Gabe Romero are running this year and must be held responsible for their votes. The job of the board is specifically to represent citizens, and they failed miserably.

3) Council member Michael Subin. Subin's public behavior is often controversial. He is dedicated and has accomplished many things in his tenure on the County Council. But Subin doesn't challenge Weast, and he too arrogantly questioned the inspector general's authority. He has abdicated his responsibility for oversight.

4) Doug Duncan. The county executive refused to meet with our group during the entire process — disgraceful for an elected official. Amazingly, his name almost never came up during the whole fight.