

## County working to sell former Peary High

Proposed price is \$1.9 million for 20 acres in Aspen Hill

by Margie Hyslop | Staff writer

Montgomery County Council members are questioning, and the county school board is opposing, a proposal to sell the former Robert E. Peary High School in Aspen Hill to the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy.

The county's Board of Education, which learned of the plan "very recently" is sending the council a letter objecting to the sale, because enrollment is growing and board members do not want to the county to give up property that could be used as a school, said schools spokesman Dana Tofig.

Valerie Ervin, chairwoman of the council's Education Committee, said, "It seems a little rushed — that's why I'm slowing it down a little."

Although the council's lawyers said no public hearing is required, Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring, has requested one, as well as a joint meeting of the Education and Management and Fiscal Policy committees to review the matter.

The Berman academy, which has been leasing the property since 1996, has made almost \$9 million in improvements to what had become a dilapidated building after the school system closed Peary High School in 1984, Behnam Dayanim, vice president of the orthodox school, said in a phone interview Tuesday afternoon. Dayanim said the academy has long wanted to make Peary its permanent home.

Ervin and Councilman Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park said that the price proposed by County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), about \$1.9 million, seems low.

"I can't imagine this property is worth only \$2 million," Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park, said of the school and the 20 acres on which it is situated.

According to the Maryland Department of Assessments and Taxation the land alone is valued at nearly \$14.5 million. The 258,694-square-foot school at 13300 Arctic Ave. was built in 1960.

A price formula for selling the property to the academy was struck at the time the lease was signed in 1996, said Diane Schwartz Jones, an assistant chief administrative officer for the county.

An average of appraisals, based on the characteristics of the property and limited prospects for developing it, was used to set the price, Schwartz Jones said. Under the lease terms, if the county decided to sell the site, it would be offered to the academy at the appraised price, plus an adjustment based on the Consumer Price index.

The terms of the lease also require sale of the school to be approved by the state's Board of Public Works.