

Wednesday, November 09, 2011

## **State school construction dollars fall way short: Montgomery councilman**

### **Council may have to reconsider 'forward funding' projects**

by Andrew Ujifusa, Staff Writer

County officials fear the state's track record of stiffing Montgomery on school construction money will continue this year.

The County Council's Education Committee on Monday gave the thumbs-up to Montgomery County Public Schools' official request for \$194.7 million in state funding aid for construction in fiscal 2013, out of a total request of \$278.8 million.

But since 2006, the school system has received on average only about 29 percent of its request for state aid, and only 12 percent of Maryland's annual funding for school construction statewide.

County Councilman Philip M. Andrews of Gaithersburg claimed the latter number was particularly unfair given that the school system accounted for 17 percent of the state's total public school population in 24 districts.

Last year, county schools received \$42 million in state aid for school projects, although \$9 million of that was one-time funding coming from a hike in the state alcohol tax. In total, \$312 million was distributed by Maryland for school construction out of \$612 million in requests.

"This allocation is way below what it needs to be," said Andrews (D-Dist. 3), a member of the Education Committee.

Since fiscal 2008, the school system's enrollment has increased by nearly 10,000 students to more than 146,000, a rise Andrews said was unmatched elsewhere in the state.

"Our increased enrollment hurts us on both sides of the ledger," said Council President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring and Education Committee chairwoman, referring to capital and operating budget needs.

For fiscal 2013, although its official request is \$194.7 million based on eligible projects, the school system assumes it will receive only about \$40 million from the state, although that number itself may be high given the last three years of non-alcohol tax funding.

For fiscal 2013, as part of the 2013-2018 Capital Improvements Program, Superintendent of Schools Joshua P. Starr's request of \$278.8 million is \$50 million higher than previously approved costs for fiscal 2013.

County officials themselves have said the school system's 2013 request is too high and will be cut if the Board of Education approves Starr's request.

Asked if the council was simply asking for more state money while cutting its own school construction funding, Andrews said even though the county may cut money out of the board's request in 2013, it may end up spending more on school construction than in fiscal 2012.

"How much county is going to spend in school construction funding next year, it's too early to say," he said.

Ervin also expressed concern about the county's forward-funding of school projects. In this arrangement, the county pays for projects due to receive state aid as they are planned and built, and the state eventually pays the county back.

Projects are eligible for state aid only after they have been approved by the council. For fiscal 2013, the school system has asked for \$17.8 million from the state for forward-funded projects that are either under way or finished.

An analysis from County Council staff said that unless the state distributed more aid for eligible projects, officials would have to reconsider forward-funding projects and whether to defer their construction.

"We don't know where we stand at all," Ervin said.