

**Before the Montgomery County Council
MCCPTA Testimony
FY 2013 Capital Budget and
FY 2013-2018 Capital Improvements Program**

February 9, 2012

Good evening, President Berliner and Councilmembers. I am Kristin Tribble, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs. I speak tonight on behalf of the nearly 50,000 members in our organization to advocate for the welfare of the 147,000 MCPS students in the county. MCCPTA speaks with one voice for all children.

Every year, MCCPTA adopts a set of priorities for the capital budget. Each year, we describe how these priorities will provide a safe, secure and modern facility for all of our students. These priorities seek to create school environments that are most conducive to productive learning.

In most years, this county's steadfast support of public education means that the debate lies in how far the Council can go to advance our priorities, not whether our priorities are being advanced at all. But this year is different. This year, the County Executive's proposal does not advance all of our priorities. As a result, this year, we ask that you fund the Board of Education's requested CIP amount, not the County Executive's.

As you will hear in the testimony from our clusters, we support many of the individual projects listed in the CIP, and we are pleased to see more being proposed in the area of systemic maintenance. But you also will hear in the testimony that many of our priorities are not being addressed, or are being delayed. In particular, MCCPTA opposes the delays in addition projects and in the middle and high school modernization schedule. These delays waste the best construction market in a decade, and harm students at 23 middle and high schools either on or waiting to be added to the modernization list.

We believe that these projects can be kept on track and stay within our County's means. There are other alternatives available that better achieve our priorities. Getting to that end is a big task – a much bigger task than my three minutes allow me to describe. To achieve our goal, we will need the cooperation of the Board, MCCPTA, the state, the County Executive, and the County Council to meet our capital needs. So, this year, we have a different request of the Council. We ask that you work with us through this budget cycle to find ways to keep the modernizations on track, to provide capacity where it is needed, and to fund our systemic needs. At a minimum, we ask you to work with us to keep the Wheaton High School/Edison High School of Technology on its programmed CIP track, not be delayed as proposed by the County Executive.

School Modernizations

Despite efforts to “catch up” with deteriorating school buildings, MCPS continues to modernize at a pace that is too slow. The proposal to delay the middle and high school modernizations only exacerbates that already slow pace.¹ Examining the long list of schools on the modernization list or waiting to be added to the modernization list, it is clear that MCPS will need to devote substantial resources just to bring these buildings to a level enjoyed by other students in the county.

Our primary complaint with the proposed delay in the modernizations is that it ignores the opportunity presented by the best construction market in at least a decade. MCPS reports that current bids continue to be 20-30% lower than they were a few years ago. Surely this is the result of a down economy where construction firms are aggressively competing to maintain business. It’s a buyer’s market, especially for large projects like our modernizations. When the prospect is saving 30% on a \$40 million middle school or a \$100 million high school, the prudent thing to do is to attempt to bid the project sooner rather than later. In fact, if the Council were to compare the construction cost estimates of individual projects in the Current Replacements/Modernizations line item in the CIP budget, you will see virtually every estimate has been reduced by several million dollars or more. These modernizations are the best value available at this time.

County-wide Projects

MCCPTA has been pleased to see the CIP gradually shift more money toward core systemic projects such as HVAC, PLAR and Roof Replacements. County-wide programs such as these have been very successful in the past and can, over the long term, lessen the need for extensive renovations or modernizations as our newer facilities age. We therefore have consistently supported the expansion of existing county-wide programs and the development of new systemic programs similar to the roof replacement and HVAC programs in the CIP. We need MORE well-defined county-wide budget programs that maintain our schools and lessen the need for costly repairs and remediation, that lower energy usage and that improve security in existing school buildings.

With respect to the HVAC project, for example, we would like to see MCPS set a target for routine replacement/rehabilitation of HVAC systems. We believe the annual amount allocated to HVAC replacements should reflect a reasonable expectation of the useful life of a system and should enable MCPS to replace or rehabilitate the HVAC systems at all 200 schools at the end of the system’s useful life. In other words, we should not plan the HVAC item (as we do today) based on the amount of money we think is available. We should plan it based on the amount we project is needed.

¹ Even the discussion of a “pace” of modernizations is a bit misleading. The Board has not set an objective for when schools should be modernized. Instead, reports of the “pace” of modernizations, merely represents the number of schools modernized recently divided by the total number of schools at that educational level. With the current proposed delay, the pace of modernizations will lengthen.

Other Concerns

For many years, we have expressed concern with the relationship between capital replacements, which are funded through the CIP, and maintenance, which is an Operating Budget item. For years, MCPS has struggled to keep up with repairs and has had precious little room for preventive maintenance. If MCPS wants its buildings to last longer, plans must be made to maintain them better. We seek your assistance in ensuring that the operating budget needs created by the CIP will be adequately addressed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we recognize that the short term economic difficulties place great pressures on this budget and on the Council's task. Nevertheless, we believe that our CIP priorities can be better achieved through alternatives to the County Executive's proposal. We pledge to continue to work with all stakeholders to evaluate alternatives over the next few months. We ask that you continue to work with us to keep the modernizations on track, to provide capacity where it is needed, and to fund our systemic needs. All of the solutions will require time and an open mind. Therefore, we ask you tonight to give both of those to us.

Thank you and good evening.