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Dear Members of the MCPS Board of Education:

The Rosemary Hills Primary School Parent Teacher Association (RHPS PTA) strongly supports the construction of Bethesda-Chevy Chase Middle School # 2 at the Rock Creek Hills Park location in Kensington.¹ A thorough site selection process considered all relevant sites for a middle school and concluded that the Rock Creek Hills site was the best option. While we recognize that the communication of that decision was poor, we believe that the advantages of this location clearly outweigh any disadvantages. We fear a new process will, at best, delay an essential new middle school. At worst, it could deprive our community of one altogether. *Quite simply, our community must have a new middle school ready for our children in 2017 and this location has already been identified as the best option.*

Rosemary Hills Primary School families have an important interest in the completion of the middle school. First, our young children are the students who will benefit from a new school or suffer from its absence; second, our children are now experiencing first-hand the overcrowding that is projected at Westland; and third, our community is far from Westland. This distance results in long commutes, greater area traffic, and a group of middle school students who are disconnected from their school community. Many students from Silver Spring and Chevy Chase have a 45-minute bus ride to get to school; and many parents are equally disconnected, undercutting the very involvement essential to strong schools. Needless to say, the problems of over-enrollment and transportation will only get worse with the changes at Bethesda Naval Hospital, development of the Chevy Chase Lake area, and continued demographic trends. **We need a new middle school now.** Westland Middle School is overcrowded and the projected enrollment is expected to far exceed the current capacity. This is having a deleterious impact on the current students and is trending downward. It hurts our children and the great reputation of our schools. Our children should not have to shuffle from portable to portable as they matriculate through our cluster.

RHPS parents overwhelmingly support the Rock Creek Hills site. On October 26 we sent a survey home (in English and Spanish) to all Rosemary Hills families, asking the following question "Does your family support construction of a new BCC-Cluster Middle School at the Rock Creek Hills location?" The overwhelming response was yes. Indeed, over 87% of parents are in favor of a new middle school at Rock Creek Hills.

The Rock Creek Hills site is the best available site. The Site Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC) was legally formed and performed its duties in accordance with the law and direction of the Board of Education. This was an advisory committee to MCPS and not the ultimate decision-making body on site selection. The MCPS Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning regulation states, in part, that local PTAs, or other parent or student representatives, along with appropriate MCPS staff, should be involved in planning processes such as site selection. A civic

¹ The RHPS PTA represents over 600 families, with nearly 700 PreK through 2nd grade students at Rosemary Hills.

or homeowner association must be registered with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission in order to participate. In this case, the volunteer PTA representatives

were PTA presidents from all our cluster schools at that time. They volunteered a great deal of their time and acted in good faith to represent the interests of all families in the cluster. There was a challenge to whether the April 28, 2011 Board of Education closed session violated the Open Meeting Act. The findings that this meeting failed to give public notice and keep minutes did not include findings concerning the composition of the site selection committee. As previously stated, we agree that the process was not communicated well. But, problems with communications should not be imputed to the merits of the decision. The Rock Creek Hills Park site is the best location for the new middle school in light of the criteria that were considered.

• **The Rock Creek Hills neighborhood was designed around the school that existed on that very site for decades.** Indeed, the very first parcel of land recorded in this

neighborhood was a school, with the residential lots subdivided later on. As was made evident during the site selection process, the BCC cluster does not have a perfect site that was accidentally overlooked. This is an urbanized area that contains few parcels comprising 20 acres or more of open space (even assuming availability). Hence, nine of the ten locations considered in the site selection process were smaller than the 20 acre standard for a middle school.

• **MCPS planners have worked creatively to design a state-of-the-art school building at Rock Creek Hills with a very small footprint.** We caution that the loud voices raising concerns about the limits of the location should be balanced against the hundreds of families who see the immediate need for a new middle school. While we know that there will be challenges, we believe that with proper design a school that is the equivalent of Westland is possible. Moreover, we believe that the school will be a much-needed amenity for the community, including improved recreational facilities for children and meeting spaces available to the community.

The RHPS PTA fully supports design improvements that can mitigate any environmental or other impacts. For example, we agree with the necessity of maintaining a buffer between the school and the surrounding neighborhood. In turn, we expect that impacts such as storm water management and loss of trees will be subject to Federal, State and County requirements, the latter of which are some of the most stringent in the nation. We look forward to a process that will ensure that the final design balances all the important issues of traffic, environmental protection, community recreation, and safety.

More poor communication is not the answer. While opponents of the Rock Creek Hills Site have raised valid questions about communication of the site selection process, we were baffled by Dr. Starr's sudden decision to disregard years of work and restart the site selection process. The solution to controversy generated by bad communication (when selecting the site) is not solved by MORE bad communication (in deciding to reopen the site selection process). The late night surprise announcement was the subject of no comment or deliberation and flew in the face of real and rising vocal support for the school. The fact that the decision appears to have been the direct result of strenuous NIMBY lobbying will only make all future site selections more difficult and political. This is no way to build schools.

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Moreover, the lack of communication throughout the site selection process has put PTA representatives from our schools in an awful position. We are already seeing a reluctance to volunteer for PTA leadership positions, due in large part to MCPS "politics." It is not fair to expect PTA leaders to volunteer to take part in a new site selection process, knowing how unpleasant it has been for all involved thus far. In addition, the time spent dealing with the MCPS "drama" is time NOT spent working to support our current schools.

On a final note, we want the Board of Education to know that Westland and Middle School #2 must offer equal curriculum choices (including the International Baccalaureate program), and that when boundaries are drawn for the two middle schools, maintaining diversity throughout our Cluster should continue to be a priority.

We must move past the selection process and get on to the important job of ensuring that the design and construction process is done in an exemplary manner and that BCC Middle School #2 is open to our kids by 2017.

Sincerely,

Karen Jacob, RHPS PTA Co-President

Allison Delfin, RHPS PTA Co-President

Rafe Petersen, RHPS PTA MCPS Liaison

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