

**Blair Cluster
CIP testimony
presented to the Montgomery County Council
May 1, 2007
(as delivered in person)**

Good evening. My name is Pete Lafen, one of the Blair Cluster Coordinators together with Susan Fleck and Bladimir Duenas.

In the Down County High School Consortium, and in our DCC area middle and elementary schools, CIP investments are a key physical indicator to families that Montgomery County will continue investing in facilities and programs needed to meet the serious challenges faced by our schools, and will continue to keep families in the public schools.

We urge your support for the CIP amendments that provide for significant capacity improvements affecting Takoma Park, Piney Branch, East Silver Spring, and Sligo Creek Elementary Schools. These amendments result from a remarkably successful consultative process with the four school communities, and are urgently needed to provide the space and the programs for the students in these schools. A letter from the PTA presidents of the four schools is attached to our testimony this evening.

These are amendments that make improvements to the physical plant and programs of four schools affecting over 1700 students. They are not merely for the elimination of portables. The amendments create capacity for schools that have reached their limits and does so in a way that creates new and neighborhood based, pedestrian friendly schools supported by a diverse set of parents and administrators in the four school communities.

Beyond our cluster we strongly endorse the recommendations of our other DCC clusters, particularly those of the Northwood and Einstein clusters. For the continued academic progress of our cluster's students, to reduce overcrowding, and to make school choice work for all of our communities, Montgomery County must make the capital investments that will make each of our DCC high schools capable of attracting and serving the students in our portion of Montgomery County.

We thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this evening.

April 30, 2007

Dear County Council Members,

As four schools directly affected by the Amendments to the FY 2007-2012 CIP, we write you to tell you that the moneys for construction at East Silver Spring Elementary and Takoma Park Elementary Schools is *not* merely about replacing portables. It is about eliminating overcrowding, creating safe schools, and looking forward to the possibility of growth in our student population – a trend counter to the rest of the county.

The expansion of the two elementary schools alleviates overcrowding in Sligo Creek Elementary and is expected to keep Piney Branch Elementary School just below capacity (PBES has the smallest school footprint in the county and can not go beyond capacity). The construction will relieve overcrowding in the lowest corner of the county and allow students to go to schools closer to their homes. Principals and parents of all four schools actively participated in a Roundtable process organized by MCPS in which we discussed numerous options and decided on the present course. Each school carried out an extensive consultative process to agree to the solution that is being implemented now. The construction plans that affect the four schools are welcome by parents in all four of our schools, affecting 1., 00 students and their families.

Takoma Park Elementary School will be ready to begin construction in the summer of 2008, and East Silver Spring continues in the planning process but would like to move ahead. The schools need the full funding of the amended CIP in order to proceed with the construction.

The background:

Takoma Park Elementary School (Kindergarten-2nd grade) has seen increasing enrollment on average over the past 5 years. There are 416 students in the 3-year school. The school is in the lowest corner of the county and is constricted by county boundaries on three sides. TPES had to drop its Headstart program a few years ago to make room for kindergarteners. TPES has 12 portables used by 2nd graders and specials.

Sligo Creek Elementary School (Kindergarten-5th grade) has seen increases and decreases in enrollment, but it is still above its enrollment of six years ago. Students from the farthest corner of Takoma Park are bussed to Sligo Creek Elementary – these are students who lived in Prince George’s County and became Montgomery County residents when the Montgomery County annexed the portion of the city of Takoma Park that was in PG county. Sligo Creek ES has 8 portables. They will acquire 4 rooms in SSIMS this year and thus are down to 6 portables for next year. Less portables, but more classrooms required – they still feel the squeeze. Sligo Creek ES shares a building and property with Silver Spring International MS.

East Silver Spring Elementary School (Kindergarten-2nd grade with pre-K classes) lost its third graders to Piney Branch Elementary School in 2004-05 in order to adjust to the K-2 curriculum, and so that ESS students would articulate at the same time as TPES

students at Piney Branch Elementary School. However, parents overwhelmingly want to make ESS a K-5 school, accessible by walking rather than by bussing. This preference existed before the change in the articulation pattern, but it came out even more strongly in the Roundtable Process and consultations with parents.

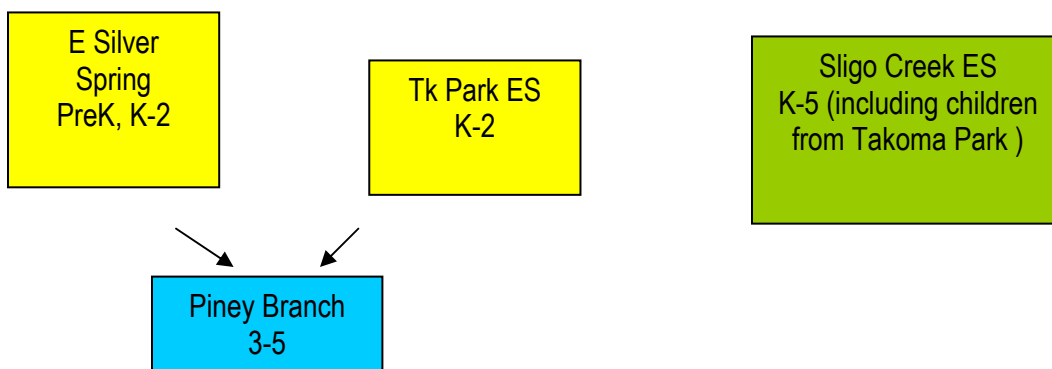
Piney Branch Elementary School (3rd-5th grade) has 481 students and zero room to take on new portables or to build on because of its small footprint. Whereas after construction, the students from East Silver Spring would no longer attend PBES, it is expected that some students will move from Sligo Creek ES to both Takoma Park ES and Piney Branch ES so that Piney Branch ES will maintain enrollment.

In the table below, one can see that both Sligo Creek ES is over capacity (and has no more room to expand) and Takoma Park ES is severely over capacity and has 12 portables with room for no more.

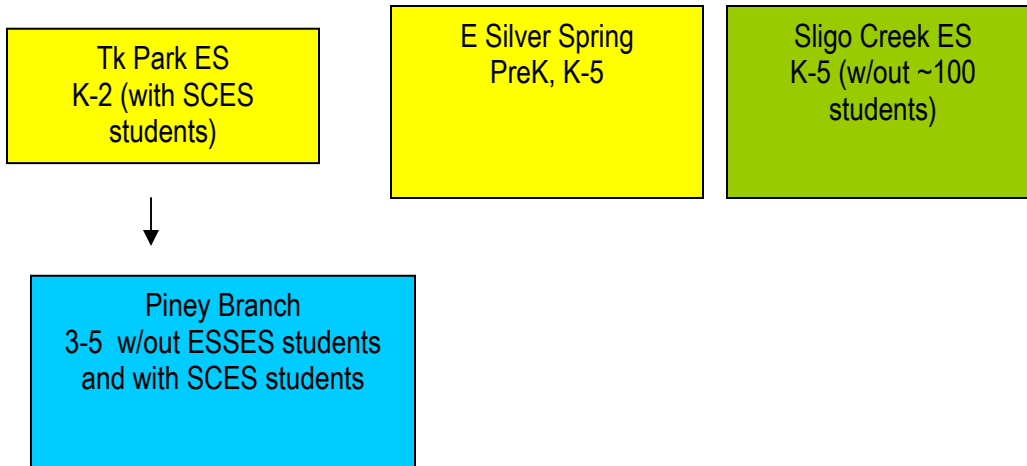
2006-07 difference between capacity and enrollment

	Actual enrollment	Program Capacity	Capacity
Sligo Creek ES (K-5)	619	536	83
Piney Branch ES (3-5)	481	565	-84
East Silver Spring ES (HS-2)	256	352	-96
Takoma Park ES (K-2)	416	279	137

In the diagram below, one can see the present articulation pattern for students in these four schools:



The articulation pattern would change after the construction to the following:



Takoma Park ES will have more capacity, and Takoma Park ES will articulate with Piney Branch ES. East Silver Spring ES will have its 3rd-5th graders back, and Sligo Creek would be undercapacity again. As you can see, this is much much more than a ‘portable issue’.

We diverge for one moment from the CIP to address an Operating Budget issue. All four schools agreed to support East Silver Spring ES in securing funding for a signature or special program. The other three schools all have signature programs – Takoma Park ES and Piney Branch ES have science and social studies curricula and accelerated ‘Gifted and Talented’ learning, and Sligo Creek ES has a French immersion program for out of boundary students and a signature math and science program for the base area students (of which the math portion is being cut). All schools agree that East Silver Spring ES is due for such a program to benefit its school community, a large share of whom are children of new immigrants for whom there is a significant need for expanded enrichment opportunities.

We are hopeful that other maintenance remains on course. We mention in passing here the issue of a very leaky Piney Branch ES roof that affects library, kitchen and cafeteria, but we will address such issues next year in greater detail.

For now, we merely ask that you recognize that the amendment year requests of 12.3 million for ESSES and 15.6 million for TPES, while unusually large, are addressing a systemic and well-thought out community response from both principals and parents to address overcrowding, safety, walking to school, and portable use for nearly 2,000 students.

Testimony for Amendment to FY 2007-2012 CIP for Takoma Park ES, East Silver Spring ES, Sligo Creek ES, and Piney Branch ES

Construction in schools with K-2 students remaining on-site, as has been decided for both construction projects, requires quick execution. Please help us reach our objective to move ahead this coming year with both planning and construction.

Sincerely,

Denyse Hamilton, PTA President, Takoma Park ES
Sue Katz-Miller, PTA President, Piney Branch ES
Debbie Spielberg, PTA President, Sligo Creek ES
Shellie Williams, PTA President, East Silver Spring ES

cc: County Executive Isaiah Leggett

Appendix 1. Enrollment trends in ESSES, PBES, SCES, and TPES, 2000-2007

Enrollment in Blair Cluster Schools, 2000-01 to 2006-07

	Sligo Creek ES (K- 5)	Piney Branch ES (3- 5)	East Silver Spring ES (HS-2)	Takoma Park ES (K- 2)	TOTAL
2000-01	601	558	408	379	1,946
2001-02	630	541	371	368	1,910
2002-03	668	556	375	389	1,988
2003-04	647	511	361	389	1,908
2004-05	657	545	267	406	1,875
2005-06	634	497	255	403	1,789
2006-07	619	481	256	416	1,772

Change in enrollment from 2000 to 2006

18	-77	-152*	37
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*Note that ESS went from K-3 to K-2 in 2004.

Annual percent change

	Sligo Creek ES (K- 5)	Piney Branch ES (3- 5)	East Silver Spring ES (HS-2)	Takoma Park ES (K- 2)
2000-01 to 2001-02	4.8%	-3.0%	-9.1%	-2.9%
2001-02 to 2002-03	6.0%	2.8%	1.1%	5.7%
2002-03 to 2003-04	-3.1%	-8.1%	-3.7%	0.0%
2003-04 to 2004-05	1.5%	6.7%	-26.0%	4.4%
2004-05 to 2005-06	-3.5%	-8.8%	-4.5%	-0.7%
2005-06 to 2006-07	-2.4%	-3.2%	0.4%	3.2%

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Opinion

On walking to school

Changes for Takoma and Silver Spring

BY SUE KATZ MILLER

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These four pieces of the MCPS puzzle are going to be reconfigured in a way that will bring more kids within walking distance of their assigned schools.

March 2007— I grew up in a woody New England suburb, with houses set far apart. Neighbors didn't interact much, and no one walked to school because there weren't any sidewalks. Later in life, I spent three years in West Africa, and three years in Brazil, in cities with lively street cultures. When I returned to the US, I swore I would raise my children in a community that better reflected the diversity of the world. I wanted my children to feel deeply rooted in this utopian home, to feel an intimate sense of place. I pictured them walking to a neighborhood school. And so we moved to Takoma Park.

Of course that ideal—the child meeting up with friends and kicking autumn leaves on the way to school—doesn't work out for every child, even here. Some children need resources or an environment that the neighborhood school cannot provide. And some are simply at the mercy of the behemoth Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) system. MCPS, the 17th largest school system in the US, is a vast jigsaw puzzle of interlocking schools created by decades of battles over school boundaries, expanding and shrinking student populations, new development, tight capital budgets, and the attendant issues of race and class. Instead of walking to a school nearby, many MCPS students get bused across a city, or into neighboring communities.

But now, a major change is on the horizon for four of our local schools—Takoma Park Elementary, Piney Branch Elementary, East Silver Spring Elementary and Sligo Creek Elementary. Assuming the funding comes through, these four pieces of the MCPS puzzle are going to be reconfigured in a way that will bring more kids within walking distance of their assigned schools. Thanks to savvy local PTA leaders and school principals, and, in this case at least, empathetic MCPS bureaucrats, more kids will be able to walk to nearby schools, to dawdle with friends, stomping on ice puddles or stopping to catch cicadas.

How did this happen? For years, kids from East Silver Spring have had to travel to Piney Branch Elementary in Takoma Park for 3rd to 5th grade. And some Takoma Park kids across the old PG County line have been



bused clear across Takoma to Sligo Creek Elementary. These awkward patterns were created when the new Montgomery Blair was built and Takoma Park unified into Montgomery County, about ten years ago. But now, both Takoma Park Elementary and Sligo Creek Elementary are overcrowded.

So MCPS convened a “roundtable” where parents (including Chris Barclay, who is now on the Board of Education) and principals designed a solution endorsed by all four of these school communities. Under the new plan, MCPS will build additions onto both Takoma Park Elementary and East Silver Spring Elementary. East Silver Spring will become a K-5 school, so more kids can stay in their own neighborhood. Takoma Park Elementary (K-2nd) and Piney Branch (3rd-5th) would then have room to take in what they hope will be some 80 Takoma Park kids currently assigned to Sligo Creek Elementary, relieving overcrowding there, and bringing these kids “home” to Takoma Park.

My son is a 4th-grader at Piney Branch Elementary, a miniature global village on Maple Avenue. Piney Branch families speak languages including Spanish, French, Amharic, Somali, Urdu, Bengali, Tagalog, Ewe and Bembe. At the elementary school level, our kids are still relatively innocent of ethnic, economic or legal-status divisions. They make new friends easily, often with the students who happen to end up in their homeroom. And that has meant Takoma Park kids and East Silver Spring kids forging close friendships across all of these lines.

Nevertheless, melding these two local school populations into one community has always been a challenge for Piney Branch. East Silver Spring kids can’t walk home, which means many of them can’t stay after school unless the school finds money for an activity bus. The two sets of PTA parents, the two sets of kids, all have to adjust to a new school and to each other. The Takoma families, because they’re in their home territory, and because they outnumber the East Silver Spring families almost three to one, tend to dominate. The East Silver Spring families who rely on public transportation have to take a bus to get to a PTA meeting, or to volunteer in the classrooms. Some East Silver Spring families have felt alienated and even disrespected by the statistically whiter and wealthier Takoma Park families. It’s asking a lot. “I’ve always seen the three schools as one community,” says PBES Principal Bertram Generlette. “So it feels like we’re losing a part of us. But I understand their need to be in their own community.”

When East Silver Spring families explain that they want to keep their kids in their own neighborhood, some Takoma parents feel betrayed. I guess this is a reality check on utopia. Not everybody wants to be a part of Takoma Park – they just want to be close to home. East Silver Spring has a higher percentage of low-income families and Spanish-speaking families. So many Takoma parents assumed that East Silver Spring families would jump at the chance to have their kids bused into Takoma. But in surveys and community meetings, it is clear that what East Silver Spring wants most is to continue to build their



Pictured from top to bottom: Sligo Creek Elem. School; East Silver Spring Elementary School; Portable passageway at Takoma Park Elementary School; Piney Branch Elementary School.

own community and send their kids to their own neighborhood school. To walk to school. "Most people like the idea of staying in the same school for a longer period of time," says Leigh Gilles-Brown, a former East Silver Spring Elementary PTA President. "It's one less transition for their kids."

Montgomery County prides itself on being "one of the most diverse school systems in the nation." The hope is that the Takoma Park students who will come over from Sligo Creek Elementary will help to offset any loss of diversity caused by the departure of the East Silver Spring kids.

But also, it's important to keep in mind that all of these schools are unusual in their exuberant diversity of kids. Last year, Piney Branch had 42% black, 28% white, and 24% Hispanic students. The "black" category itself is truly diverse, and includes a longstanding local African-American middle class, recent African immigrants from all over the continent, and the children of interracial families. The other schools all skew a little bit one way or the other from this balance, but all have significant percentages in all three "racial" categories, with no one group in the vast majority. This balance is part of what makes our "downcounty" neighborhoods so unique.

Takoma and East Silver Spring kids will still meet up, but it won't be until they both feed into Takoma Park Middle School. My seventh-grade daughter has been tight with her East Silver Spring friends since her Piney Branch days. She worries that after the changes in articulation, "At middle school, people are going to stay more in the groups they came in with." She sounds wistful. It's an issue the Middle School, like most middle schools, must address. And it means we will all, students and parents, have to work a little harder at building community outside of the schools.

East Silver Spring will need county resources now to develop a strong "K through five" program. "We insisted on a guarantee of some type of special magnet program," says parent Gilles-Brown. "If you're going to have a bigger school and a browner school, we will need that to compete." But at least, getting the entire community involved in building a strong school will be easier because East Silver Spring is truly a local school, serving neighborhood kids, and neighborhood parents. After immigrating from around the world, families want to put down deep roots, and feel real ownership of their local school. The school, embedded in the community, becomes the social hub of a vibrant neighborhood. That's my vision for East Silver Spring, for Takoma Park, for all of us.

Sue Katz Miller (suekatzmiller@yahoo.com) is a former Newsweek reporter, and current PTA President at Piney Branch Elementary.

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