

**Written Testimony of
Steve Augustino
On Behalf of the
Gaithersburg Cluster**

**Montgomery County Board of Education
November 11, 2009**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit comments on behalf of the Gaithersburg cluster concerning the Superintendent's Recommended Fiscal Year 2011 Capital Budget and FY 2011-16 CIP. The Gaithersburg cluster's most important construction project, the replacement of Gaithersburg High School's building, is scheduled in the CIP. We support full implementation of the Recommendation as quickly as possible.

We also support the testimony of MCCPTA concerning the CIP. We are pleased that our neighbors in Clarksburg will see new construction that will help alleviate the severe overcrowding they are experiencing today. We also strongly support the increase in HVAC spending to address a backlog of repair and replacement needs of our climate control systems. The HVAC project will lead to more consistent learning environments, healthier schools, and more efficient energy consumption. We need more well-defined county-wide programs such as this in order to maintain the quality of our school system.

In addition, we would support even greater increases in the PLAR program in order to make our buildings last longer and serve our students better. In my testimony at the September 17th Community Forum, I discussed the impact of MCPS' recent painting of the hallways and lockers of Gaithersburg High School. The cost was nominal, but the impact has been tremendous. Our lockers are a deep Trojan blue, the walls are a bright white and the entire school looks so much better. As one of our teachers stated: "This is my eleventh year at GHS and I have never walked [into the building on] the first day back, feeling pride in our school the way I did this year." Another teacher commented that, "The new paint gives the school a physical appeal that I believe is driving students to be more respectful of their environment." Now THAT is value for the money.

As you look at the other schools waiting on the modernization lists or waiting for additions, I urge you to consider what can be done in a cost-effective way to make the school a little more hospitable. We owe our current students – not just their younger siblings – a classroom that is safe, secure and conducive to learning.

Modernizing Gaithersburg High School

For years, you have heard the Gaithersburg cluster say that its number one CIP priority is the long-overdue replacement building for Gaithersburg High School. We are thrilled to see tangible signs that this project is on its way. We thank the many people on the Board, within MCPS, on the County Council and in the City of Gaithersburg who have listened to our pleas and are making the new Gaithersburg High School a priority.

It is critical that the modernizations of our schools, particularly the next four high schools on your modernization list: Paint Branch, Gaithersburg, Wheaton and Seneca Valley, stay on track. These schools – which we have affectionately termed “the elephants” – are precisely the schools where MCPS faces some of its most inferior buildings and some of its most challenging educational situations. These schools are among the highest in the county in percentage of minority students, of non-English proficient students, of high poverty students and of special education students. It makes it extremely difficult for MCPS to “raise the bar and close the gap” when it handicaps its neediest students with its most inadequate facilities.

The Board also should consider the recurring cost savings that come from modernizing our schools. Like an old car, the high schools on the modernization list have high maintenance costs and guzzle a lot of fuel. Replacing the car with a fuel efficient vehicle often is the best option, even if it requires some belt tightening to make the initial investment. Similarly, in considering the value of the modernizations, the Board should consider the improved savings from a LEED-certified building. How much does MCPS spend in maintenance to apply band-aids to outdated HVAC systems, leaky roofs and deteriorating infrastructure at the schools on your modernization list? How much could MCPS save by replacing these high schools with energy efficient schools? At Great Seneca Elementary School, MCPS estimates that it reduces potable water usage by 43% with low-flow fixtures, saves \$0.50 per square foot per year in energy cost through the use of geothermal energy and reduces utility costs by \$50,000 per year due to a white Energy Star roof. How much would MCPS save through similar measures at the schools on the modernization list? In the long run, moving forward with the modernizations clearly is the smartest choice.

“Maximum Advantage” -- Accelerating the Bids on Upcoming Projects

MCCPTA’s theme this year is “maximum advantage.” That theme applies very well to the modernizations in this CIP. The Board should take maximum advantage of a historic construction market to accelerate the bids for upcoming modernization projects. Our most significant criticism is that we think the Board can do more to take maximum advantage of this market. In particular, we urge the Board to be aggressive in preparing its next round of projects for bid, in order to realize potential savings on these projects.

MCCPTA has provided a list of 14 additions and modernizations that have not yet been bid, but which could be prepared for bid more quickly. We urge the Board to do everything possible to accelerate the design process for as many of these schools as possible. If MCPS can possibly save 30% on construction, now is not the time to be timid.

We believe that, in addition to Gaithersburg High School, the best candidates for acceleration within the next 12-15 months are: Hoover MS, Seven Locks ES, Glenallen ES, Beverly Farms ES and Bel Pre ES. For Seven Locks, the Board approved preliminary plans 9 months ago. Hoover, like Gaithersburg, had an architect appointed

months ago, and should be ready for your approval of plans very soon. The other schools are scheduled to have architects approved at your December meeting, and work could proceed quickly on the projects.

MCCPTA's study of contracts awarded in the past three years shows that designs can be completed in well under a year, so what we are asking is not impractical. And it certainly is worth it. We urge you to prepare the Gaithersburg and Hoover modernizations for bid no later than one year from today, with the Glenallen, Beverly Farms and Bel Pre modernizations proceeding to bid within three months after that.

CIP Priorities

Finally, the Gaithersburg cluster shares Board member Phil Kauffman's concern that the stated CIP priorities should be revised. The CIP currently lists modernizations fourth in priority – after critical health and safety projects, additions and capital maintenance projects. This list suggests that funding large projects such as the high school modernizations will be your lowest priority and, consequently, virtually guarantees that the modernization schedule will be delayed, potentially multiple times. We respectfully disagree with such an outcome. These modernizations are essentially replacements of entire schools. They are not optional aspirations; they are critical to ensuring a safe, secure and suitable learning environment for the students affected.

We recommend that the Board re-order the priorities so that modernizations are accorded more significance. In comparison to additions, modernizations should receive at least equal priority with the most critical of our addition projects and possibly a higher priority than additions that only slightly exceed MCPS' minimum threshold for construction. The modernization of a school is no less important than additions needed to relieve severe overcrowding in a facility. Both impact the ability of the school to educate its students according to the high standards we have set. Both raise health and safety concerns due to inadequate facilities. Both require immediate action to relieve the situation because no suitable alternatives exist. Modernizations should not receive a lower priority than these projects.

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Once again, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Gaithersburg cluster schools. Although this is the last time that I may address you as a cluster coordinator, I look forward to continuing to work with you to address the CIP needs of the Gaithersburg schools and those throughout the county. Thank you.