



**Before the Montgomery County Board of Education
MCCPTA Testimony
Superintendent's Recommended
FY 2011 Capital Budget and
the FY 2011-2016 Capital Improvements Program**

November 11, 2009

Good evening, President Brandman and Members of the Board of Education. I am Kay Romero, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs. I speak tonight on behalf of the over 50,000 members in our organization to advocate for the welfare of the more than 140,000 MCPS students in the county. MCCPTA speaks with one voice for all children.

Tonight and tomorrow night, you will hear from cluster representatives about the individual needs of the cluster schools and special centers. Collectively, we appreciate the Superintendent's efforts to keep all projects on track, to address overcrowding in areas severely lacking capacity and to implement county-wide projects to renew and revitalize our school facilities. Our objective is simple. We all want to ensure that MCPS provides our students the best opportunities to learn. We believe that excellence in learning requires excellent learning facilities. As you will hear in the testimony over these two nights, the projects listed in the CIP contribute directly to student success. Student achievement should not be compromised or delayed.

At the same time, we are here before you these next two days to say that the Board can do more, and can do it more wisely in some instances. Our theme this year is that the CIP must take "maximum advantage" of the opportunities before us.

SUMMARY

We urge you to take maximum advantage of the opportunity to address overcrowding. The projects to relieve severe overcrowding in the Bethesda, Clarksburg, Northwest and Seneca Valley clusters are welcome, but other schools remain severely overcrowded with no visible relief in sight. And, we must recognize that for the past two years, kindergarten classes have been the largest ever, and are predicted to continue for a few years at least. The Board should be questioning whether we have adequate capacity to accommodate these students, not only at the elementary level but also at the middle and high school level. No student should spend all of his or her educational years in portables or a construction zone.

We urge you to take maximum advantage of the opportunity presented by a down construction market. If construction costs are 30% below recent experiences, now is not the time to be timid with preparing the backlog of additions and modernizations for bid. We should be allocating resources to accelerating the design process so that Glenallen ES, Hoover MS, and Gaithersburg HS – and others – can be bid in the current environment. To paraphrase a prominent commercial, “Six months can save 30% on construction costs.” That is an opportunity too good to pass up.

We also should be taking maximum advantage of the money that you allocate to county-wide projects. We are extremely pleased to see our calls for more HVAC spending have been heeded. The recommendation to triple spending on HVAC upgrades is as welcome as it is long overdue. More HVAC projects mean more consistent learning environments, healthier schools, and more efficient energy consumption. We need more well-defined county-wide programs that maintain our schools, that lessen the need for costly repairs and remediation, that lower energy usage and that improve security in existing school buildings.

However, we also must critically examine the effectiveness of these projects to ensure we are receiving maximum benefit from them. For example, although we continue to support the goal of ensuring that all restrooms have fixtures that work, floors and partitions in good order and generally are clean and well maintained, our experience with the first round of the restroom renovation project has been mixed at best. Before simply continuing with more of the same for another 100 schools, the Board should evaluate whether the objectives could be achieved through different means.

Our organization has a number of other broad concerns with the Superintendent’s Recommendation. Despite efforts to “catch up” with deteriorating school buildings, MCPS continues to modernize at a pace that is too slow. In addition, we still do not see any real consideration of the capital needs of the Special Education Centers, none of which are scheduled for modernization or facility improvements other than restroom renovations.

We also are concerned that MCPS is rushing its outcome on the assessment of new schools not on the modernization list. We should establish the CIP Task Force we have been calling for to address our modernization approach. We should take this year to examine the process for modernizing schools and the criteria to be used to assess schools for modernization, so that we can move forward in the next full CIP with the remaining assessments. MCCPTA also opposes the Superintendent’s recommendation to rescind the Modernization Policy (Policy FKB). It is premature to make changes to the policy before the task force acts.

Finally, we have concerns with the procedures that are recommended to consider whether to close Monocacy Elementary School. Historically, MCCPTA has regarded the question of whether closure of a particular school is a prudent option to be a local PTA issue, but the question of the procedures to be followed is one of concern to our entire

organization. The Board's consideration of a proposed closure must provide for adequate community input and, equally importantly, adequate time to evaluate the implications. We are concerned that boundary studies and consolidation of special programs receive more time for community input and for Board consideration than the procedures proposed for Monocacy would allow. The COMAR requirements are mandatory minimums, but the Board should take the additional time to ensure a full and fair process before such decisions are made.

School Modernizations

Despite efforts to "catch up" with deteriorating school buildings, MCPS continues to modernize at a pace that is too slow. The reports in this area continue to be glum: the Superintendent now reports a pace of modernizations of 65 years for elementary schools, 76 years for middle schools and 50 years for high schools.¹ A pace of 76 years to modernize middle schools is simply too long. At this pace, Cabin John MS, which is being modernized now, will not be due for another modernization until 2085. How can we expect a school to serve its students if we modernize it on a schedule that coincides with the orbit of Halley's Comet?

Further, the Recommendation does little to take maximum advantage of the current construction market. MCPS reports that current bids are coming in 30% lower than they were a year 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.

We should be looking aggressively for ways to bid planned projects earlier than scheduled. MCPS officials have told you that it takes a minimum of 18-24 months to move a project from the schematic design stage to construction bids. We question whether this estimate reflects the best MCPS can do. MCCPTA studied every addition or modernization project for which a construction contract was awarded in the last three years (e.g., the 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years). In that time frame, 17 projects were presented to the Board (9 additions, 7 modernizations and 1 new school). All but four of these projects were presented for bid in 10 months or fewer; and the longest time frame from approved plans to bids received was 12 months. Even with a large project such as the Paint Branch HS replacement, the project will have been bid within 33 months of approval of the preliminary plans – and that project was delayed by two years due to budget concerns shortly after the plans were approved. If the project had stayed on its initial schedule, it likely would have been bid in 12-15 months.²

¹ Even this report is a bit misleading. The Board has not set an objective for when schools should be modernized. These figures represent the "pace" of modernizations, not a schedule for modernizing schools. Instead, this figure merely represents the number of schools modernized recently divided by the total number of schools at that educational level.

² Preliminary plans for Paint Branch were approved on March 13, 2007. If the project were to have been completed by the original August 2010 completion date, construction would have started in July 2008 and bids would have been received in the March-June 2008 time frame.

MCCPTA recommends that the Board set 12 months as the outside expectation for moving from schematic designs to the receipt of construction bids. We identified a list of 14 additions and modernizations that are scheduled for completion between 2012 and 2014 that are potential candidates for bid sooner than MCPS is planning. Among the best candidates are Hoover MS and Gaithersburg HS, both of which are almost at the plan approval stage, and Glenallen ES, Beverly Farms ES and Weller Road ES, where the Board is expected to appoint architects next month. In order to prepare these projects for bid as soon as possible, the Board should

- Set an expectation of no more than 12 months for design after the schematic plans are approved;
- Require MCPS to report at least monthly on the progress of the design phase of these projects; and
- Require MCPS to identify any specific obstacles to completion of the design within this time frame so that the Board may address the obstacles.

Our study of the time line for recent projects and our projections for upcoming projects are attached to this testimony.

In addition, we would like to receive further information on the costs and projects included in the Current Replacement/Modernization line item in the CIP (see p. 1-10 of the Recommendation). This line item represents modernizations for which construction funds are allocated in the next two fiscal years. To our knowledge, no new projects were added to this list, and, as discussed above, no modernizations were accelerated into this time period. Yet, the Superintendent's Recommendation estimates FY 11 at \$92 million and FY 12 at \$117 million, which are increases of \$14.4 million and \$5.7 million, respectively, from the FY 11 and FY 12 projections included in the Master Plan adopted in June 2009. We urge the Board to publish the detail behind these increases.

Capacity Projects

We are pleased to see the Superintendent recommend new projects to alleviate severe overcrowding in the four clusters subject to moratorium under the County's Growth Policy. These projects consume \$91 million in the six year CIP. Other instances of severe overcrowding are not addressed in the CIP. We would like to see the Board do more to provide maximum relief to these students as well.

We also support maintaining the project schedules for the addition projects previously planned in the CIP. It is important to keep the promises made to these schools.

Further, as discussed last year, we would like to see MCPS develop and publish a clear set of criteria for determining when school additions will be built. These criteria should include: capacity; enrollment, construction projects already on site, future

modernization dates, special programs, the number of portables, the length of time the portables have been on site, and the age and condition of the portables. The process by which decisions are made and priorities are set must be transparent so that, when funds for additions or other capital projects are allocated, all schools are judged according to the same criteria.

County-wide Projects

MCCPTA supports the increase in the HVAC replacement item to \$15 million per year. 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 also support 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.

We have the following additional recommendations relating to the Superintendent's Recommendation for county-wide projects:

- **HVAC.** We would like a list of the projects planned for the next two years under the HVAC program. Although we recognize that sometimes urgent needs may develop that were not anticipated, publishing a tentative list of HVAC projects will better enable us to evaluate whether the program is adequate to meet the needs of the county's schools. Further, we would like to see MCPS set a target for routine replacement/rehabilitation of HVAC systems. What is the useful life of an HVAC system: 15 years? 20 years? Longer? 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.
- **BMPI.** We question why this program is reduced to \$2 million per year after FY 11. We also would like more definition of the eligibility for projects under this line item. In the past, it has been hard to determine precisely what types of projects are suitable for funding under this program. In addition, schools on the modernization list often are given conflicting information concerning whether BMPI projects will be considered for their schools. These eligibility questions should be clarified.
- **PLAR.** We support continuation and expansion of the PLAR program. PLAR should include routine upkeep, such as painting and cleaning also.
- **Improved (Safe) Access to Schools.** We note that this item is not funded after the first two years, but there is no explanation of its termination. We would like to understand why this program is no longer being funded.

Further, we would like better information on the ranking criteria used by MCPS for prioritization of projects within the county-wide programs. With the full implementation of the maintenance tracking system, we should be able to identify more precisely how each of these line items is being spent each year. Moreover, we would like the waiting list for each county-wide program to be listed each year, even as we understand that the rankings may be adjusted for urgent health and safety issues, unanticipated breakdowns and the like. As is, it is virtually impossible for parents to determine if the urgent needs of our schools are being addressed.

We also must critically examine the effectiveness of these projects to ensure we are receiving maximum benefit from them. For example, although we continue to support the goal of ensuring that all restrooms have fixtures that work, floors and partitions in good order and generally are clean and well maintained, our experience with the first round of the restroom renovation project has been mixed at best.

- Restrooms are not completely renovated. The project merely repairs and replaces damaged fixtures, and broken partitions.
- Floor tiles and partitions are not replaced or upgraded, unless there is damage. When damage exists, the damaged area is repaired; the entire floor is not replaced.
- Restrooms are not upgraded with low-flow toilets, hand dryers or the like. In some instances, individual school educational foundations donated hand dryers, which were installed at that location. Schools where the community did not purchase hand dryers did not have replacements made.
- Many parents complained that round bowl toilets were replaced with oval bowl toilets, which significantly reduced the room between the partition door and the fixture.
- It is not clear when modifications will be made to make restrooms ADA compliant. Some schools complained that doorways were too narrow to accommodate wheelchairs and that ADA-accessible stalls were not available.
- Some schools complained that only some restrooms were rehabilitated. In the prior project, it appeared that some staff restrooms were not rehabilitated.
- In prior school environment surveys, MCPS asked students whether restrooms were “clean and well supplied.” In the most recent year where this data was available, surveys at the ten schools where restrooms were renovated reported that the restrooms were not “clean and well supplied” 53.0% of the time – the year after the restroom renovations were completed.

Despite these mixed results, the project is costly. Last year, MCPS spent between \$60,000 and \$150,000 per school to rehabilitate the bathrooms. The Superintendent is

proposing \$1 million each year to continue the restroom renovation project. Even at that pace, only 71 of the 110 schools assessed are scheduled for restroom renovations in the six year CIP.³ Before simply continuing with more of the same for another 100 schools, the Board should evaluate whether the objectives could be achieved through different means.

If the project is to go forward, we have several questions regarding the order of the schools as proposed. Although we understand that MCPS used an evaluation rubric similar to what was used in the past, we do not have the detailed results of the evaluations. In some instances, the ordering of schools is questionable. For example, the State Department of Public Works surveyed some of the restrooms in 2007 and 2008 as part of its annual Maintenance Survey Reports. Seven schools were evaluated as “adequate” by the Department of Public Works (the lowest ranking given to any MCPS schools). But these seven schools received restroom renovation evaluation scores that varied widely, from a high of 1786 to a low of 1177.⁴ By contrast, two schools rated “superior” by the Department of Public Works received scores of 1645 and 1201⁵

The schedule also is not coordinated with proposed additions and modernizations at the schools. Montgomery Knolls has an addition planned for 2011-12, but its restroom renovations are not scheduled until FY 2015.⁶ By contrast, in the last round, restroom renovations were coordinated with an addition at Washington Grove. This seems to be a reasonable approach, and we question why the Superintendent did not follow the same considerations in this round.

Further, costs that are embedded in countywide projects should be examined closely for overlap and cost savings. For example, has the Fire Safety Upgrades project outlived its usefulness? Originally created in 2001 to address a “punch list” of code violations cited by the Fire Marshall, the project is now described as providing for the replacement of fire alarm systems in county schools. This clearly is a worthwhile objective and one that we support. However, the project appears to overlap with PLAR items, where fire alarm systems also are being replaced. Appendix F to the Recommendation lists fire alarm or fire door projects as PLAR projects for 18 schools: Bethesda-Chevy Chase HS, Cedar Grove ES, Cloverly ES, Damascus ES, Damascus HS, Forest Knolls ES, Greenwood ES, Thurgood Marshall ES, Ridgeview MS, Rock Terrace Center, Rockville HS, Rolling Terrace ES, Seven Locks ES, Stephen Knolls Center,

³ We question how realistic even this schedule is. Despite proposing a flat \$1 million per year for the project, the Restroom Renovation Schedule in Appendix G proposes to complete 6 renovations in FY 2011, 8 in FY 2012, 10 in FY 2013, 11 in FY 2014, 14 in FY 2015 and 22 in FY 2016. By contrast, the previous restroom renovation project rehabilitated between 10 and 12 schools in each year of the four year project.

⁴ The seven schools and their restroom renovation scores are: Quince Orchard HS (1786), Rolling Terrace ES (1606), Beall ES (1394), Montgomery Knolls ES (1315), Brookhaven ES (1228), Highland ES (1181) and Flower Hill ES (1177).

⁵ These schools are Jackson Road ES (1201) and Stone Mill ES (1645).

⁶ Other schools with relevant construction projects include. Brookhaven ES (addition 11-12, renovations 16), Jackson Road ES (addition 11, renovations 16), and Highland ES (SBHC 12-13, renovations 16).

Strathmore ES, Wheaton Woods ES, White Oak MS, and Woodlin ES. We recommend that the Board review these two line items to determine if they are in fact duplicative.

Alternatively, the Fire Safety Upgrade project could be examined for possible combination with the School Security System replacement project. Fire alarm and security systems often operate as integrated systems, so it is possible that the Board could achieve greater efficiencies by upgrading and integrating school fire alarm systems with other security systems.

The CIP Task Force

For several years, we have asked the Board and the County Council to work with us to address long range capital needs for our schools. We have yet to even establish this task force, let alone make meaningful progress. We recommend that the Board, in consultation with the County Council, promptly convene a CIP Task Force that includes representatives from MCPS, the Board, the County Council, MCCPTA and the teachers' unions to discuss long range planning for our schools.

The first objective of the task force should be to identify ways to accelerate the modernization process itself. We should look for opportunities to standardize school designs in order to shorten the planning period. We should look for ways to implement systemic upgrades in order to lengthen the useful life of school facilities. We also should look at whether our existing designs will lessen the likelihood that a building will need to be replaced in order to modernize it. The need to rebuild facilities constructed in the 1950s and 1960s is a large part of the reason why modernizations cost as much as they do today. The task force should look for ways to lower these costs in the future.

We are anxious to assess the remaining schools older than 30 years that have not yet been assessed for modernization. Each year that there are schools that should be, but are not, assessed for modernization, means that the county falls farther behind and creates an even larger need for school construction. But we would first like to see a review of the criteria that comprise the current FACT score rubric. The Superintendent's Recommendation presumes that the FACT criteria will be used without change. But we cannot use the FACT criteria without a better understanding of the factors that comprise that rubric and an assessment of whether they remain relevant today. For example, for the schools that were modernized recently, or are still awaiting modernization, did the FACT score reasonably reflect the relative conditions of each of the buildings? In hindsight, do we feel that the schools were modernized in the correct order? Without a better understanding of the FACT score, we cannot be confident that more FACT assessments will appropriately prioritize the schools waiting for their modernizations.

Other Concerns

In previous testimony we have repeatedly 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. However, because maintenance is not considered until the Operating Budget, it often is difficult to evaluate the adequacy of either the capital budget or the level of maintenance needed to support the CIP. For example, when new schools or additional capacity are added, do we need to increase the maintenance capacity as well? If so, by how much, and where? We urge the Board to obtain additional information of the burden that the Recommendation will place on maintenance capabilities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we recognize that the short term economic difficulties place great pressures on this budget and on your task as a Board. As you confront the difficult task of setting priorities, we again urge you not to compromise on our goal. Every child in the system deserves a safe, secure and modern classroom that enables him or her to achieve the high standards that we set.

Thank you and good evening.
Kay Romero, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs