

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

**Montgomery County Council
February 6, 2008**

Good evening. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Gaithersburg cluster concerning the County Executive's Recommended Fiscal Year 2009 Capital Budget and the FY 2009-14 CIP. The County Executive's proposal trims the Board of Education's requested CIP by \$75 million over the six years. The most significant damage to our schools' needs would be done by drastic cuts in the request for fiscal years 2010, 2011 and 2012. Already, the Board of Education is being presented with scenarios that will delay long overdue projects such as the Gaithersburg High School replacement project. We in the Gaithersburg cluster are greatly concerned by the reductions in the "out" years, and we urge you to restore funding sufficient for the high school modernizations to proceed as scheduled. Gaithersburg, along with its sister schools on the modernization schedule – Paint Branch, Wheaton, and Seneca Valley in particular – have waited too long already. Further delays unfairly impede learning opportunities for our cluster's students.

Before addressing the impact of the proposed reductions on the Gaithersburg cluster, we would like to repeat a call that we made last year. The Gaithersburg cluster strongly supports the MCCPTA's recommendation that the Board of Education and the County Council take a more comprehensive look at long range planning issues. We believe the county needs to address the lengthy modernization schedules affecting all of our schools. At the pace MCPS has proceeded recently, high school modernizations would be completed once every 50 years, middle schools once every 76 years and elementary schools once every 49 years (all assuming no delays such as the ones that could result from the recommendation before you). These schedules are far too long. We need to work to find ways to accelerate that schedule in a fiscally responsible manner.

One area in particular that should be examined is the Board's policy that prioritizes addition projects ahead of school modernizations and replacements. Gaithersburg's seven additions in the 57 years since it was built have done little to address its systemic age problem, other than to mask its severity. Similarly, throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s, age and overcrowding problems were "alleviated" by building new schools (Quince Orchard, Watkins Mill, etc.) and moving students to other clusters, without addressing the deterioration of Gaithersburg's core infrastructure. Rather than repeat such mistakes in the future, we should develop a way to modernize buildings more quickly and cost effectively. Other schools should not have to wait the 60-plus years that Gaithersburg High School will have waited for modernization of its facility.

In the remainder of this testimony, I would like to describe to you the needs of Gaithersburg High School. When I am done, I hope you will agree that Gaithersburg's need is critical, that there is no remedy other than prompt replacement of the facility and that a delay in that project cannot be countenanced.

Gaithersburg High School

The 2009-14 CIP before you includes a long-overdue replacement building for Gaithersburg High School. Gaithersburg High School was originally constructed in 1951, when Harry Truman was in the White House and Gaithersburg was still a rural farming community. A lot has changed in the 57 years since that opening. The school has seen seven different additions, but its core facilities have never been renovated or modernized.¹ Frankly, the building has shown its age for over 20 years.

The County Executive's proposed CIP could make an already dire situation far worse. In particular, we are concerned that MCPS' preliminary scenarios propose further delaying all high school modernizations in response to the County Executive's proposed cuts in the 2010-12 budgets. Previously, MCPS proposed delaying the Paint Branch modernization by one year. As far as we understand, this delay occurred not because the need for Paint Branch's modernization is less than anticipated, but apparently because it is a large project and funds are short. We submit that there has to be a better way to decide priorities. Schools placed on the modernization list are asked to endure a lot while waiting for modernization. I can't tell you how many times we have asked about simple maintenance or other needed improvements, only to be told that it does not make sense to spend the money because "you're on the mod list." In fact, you will hear tonight from other clusters about the need for a variety of improvements – additional computer labs, new TV studios, atriums, improvements to the bus loop, modifications for signature programs, etc. Gaithersburg needs many of these same things, but we have not requested them because we know how futile that would be. No one is going to authorize the needed improvements to a building that MCPS plans to tear down in (hopefully) a few short years.

At Gaithersburg, the needs of our students are great. These needs cannot be remedied unless and until the modernization is completed. There is no interim solution. Put simply, we must move forward with the plan on time because the conditions at the

¹ MCPS records identify a "renovation" in 1978. However, prior to 1998, this renovation was noted as a partial renovation, because only approximately one third of the teaching stations were renovated at the time. In 1998, the "partial renovation" designation was dropped, making it appear that Gaithersburg was completely renovated in 1978. Not coincidentally, the shift in description of Gaithersburg's renovation coincides with the year that Gaithersburg was passed over for FACT assessments that would have placed it on the modernization schedule. Had Gaithersburg been assessed at that time, it very likely would have been modernized already, shortly before or shortly after BCC High School was modernized. Previous decisions such as these have already delayed Gaithersburg's modernization and led to the critical condition of the building today.

existing facility have deteriorated so severely that it is not fair to our students to delay them any further.

1. The Building Cannot be Fixed. The architects planning the most recent of Gaithersburg's seven additions noted that the age of the original building and the extent of the prior additions and modifications have resulted in numerous functional challenges for the school. These include narrow hallways, a maze-like layout, poor bathroom facilities and a leaky or non-functional infrastructure. As one of our teachers succinctly put it in a recent survey of GHS' facilities, "The building is out-dated and a terrible building for teaching purposes and for learning."

All concerned agree that the only feasible solution is construction of a full replacement building. That replacement is scheduled in the FY 2009-14 Capital Improvements Program (CIP). However, prior to the County Executive's trimming of the 2010 through 2012 requests, the replacement was not scheduled to be completed until August 2012, assuming no funding or construction delays. These dates would be in great peril if the County Executive's proposal is not altered.

2. The Old Building is Crumbling and Increasingly Hazardous. The MCCPTA has made it a priority to ensure that every student in the county attends school in a safe, secure and modern facility. MCPS is failing in that charge at Gaithersburg. Below is a sampling of the conditions our teachers and students endure at Gaithersburg High School today:

- Six areas of the roof have persistent leaks. One classroom has had a leak for more than five years.
- 100% of the school's electrical circuits are utilized, with no room for expansion to accommodate new facilities.
- The circuit breakers trip almost daily from stress.
- Dozens of windows leak or no longer open properly. Some windows are too heavy for teachers or students to open.
- Athletic locker rooms have no exhaust fans at all.
- Automobile exhaust from the Auto Tech program disrupts a half dozen foreign language and mechanical science classrooms daily.
- The cosmetology classroom does not have proper ventilation.
- 30% of student lockers are rusted and unusable.
- Paint, plaster and ceiling tiles throughout the building are peeling, cracking or missing.

In addition, Gaithersburg has chronic problems with its HVAC systems, problems which will only get worse over the next five years. These include:

- Multiple classrooms did not have heat for several months last semester.
- At least three classrooms do not have functioning air conditioning units.

- Half a dozen classrooms have persistent problems with ice that develops on air conditioner coils, causing water to leak onto the floor of the rooms.
- The Media Center and Guidance Office are chronically overheated, causing the school to run the air conditioner year round.

We understand the reluctance to spend money on a facility that is going to be torn down in six years. However, even an old car sometimes needs to be repaired. It is not too much to ask that every classroom have working heating and air conditioning.

3. The Existing Building Negatively Impacts Learning. Last May, the Gaithersburg cluster told you about results of a survey conducted as part of Gaithersburg High School's 10 year review by the Middle States Association. Those survey results bear repeating again this year.

As background, the Middle States review process is a rigorous evaluation of a school's performance in several key areas. One of the standards of evaluation is Standard 8 – school facilities. Standard 8 addresses whether the school's facilities are sufficient to meet student needs and contribute to the achievement of desired student learning outcomes.

Here is a sampling of what those who live with GHS day-in and day-out said in response to the Middle States Association survey on this Standard:

Our students:

- Gaithersburg is old and dirty and in many ways a health hazard. It needs to be remodeled ASAP!
- The school really needs to be rebuilt. The heating and air conditioning are broken and the restrooms are filthy.
- The school is rundown, old and many modern facilities are unavailable.
- [It is a] bad school in bad condition.

Our parents:

- The building is a disgrace. It is falling apart, moldy, [and] the roof leaks, causing dangerous puddles in the halls – it is really terrible.
- [The school is] badly in need of immediate renovation – unfair to students and staff.
- The school needs to be rebuilt. The facilities are not conducive to learning.

Our teachers:

- [The] portables smell and the ... heating and AC often do not work. I think they truly hinder learning.
- The building is out-dated and a terrible building for teaching purposes and for learning.
- Facilities are out-dated and run down. [It] takes away from school pride, and [makes it] hard to foster a sense of respect for the school and its facilities.

- Deteriorating building conditions present [a] morale problem for staff and students.
- The age and physical condition of the building negatively impacts learning.
- This school is much too old and a new facility is needed to meet the needs of the staff and students.
- The building is in need of modernization/replacement. The facility was not built to accommodate all of the needs of our students, our many programs, and our student enrollment. We have outgrown this facility.
- These students deserve a new school soon!!!! There is mold growing everywhere and there are major leaks. The building service workers do an amazing job, all things considered.

The consensus is overwhelming. Our parents are embarrassed by the condition of the building. Our teachers uniformly report that the current facility hinders learning and negatively impacts student and staff morale. Our students agree, illustrated by the student who declared Gaithersburg to be a “bad school in bad condition.” With the school in the shape it is in, the student’s negative attitude is understandable, but that negativity can translate into disinterest, lack of respect and ultimately, poor performance.

4. Gaithersburg High Is Limited in its Ability to Implement the “Learning Academy” Model without the New Building. Over the past several years, Gaithersburg High has implemented an All-Signature Academy environment. Gaithersburg’s four substantive academies, and its Ninth Grade Academy for entering students, are designed to create smaller schools within a larger student body. The academy structure nurtures the academic and career interests of students as they work toward graduation. The academies are inclusive and are designed to incorporate all learning styles. Moreover, all students, regardless of which academy they choose, take core courses required for a Maryland High School Diploma and have the opportunity to participate in Honors and Advanced Placement programs.

However, our current facilities do not permit GHS to obtain the full benefit of the academy approach. In the newest addition to the building (which essentially is phase 1 of the replacement building), Gaithersburg inaugurated a first-of-its kind NASDAQ board to allow students in our Academy of Finance to track and trade actual stocks as part of their instructional program. Unfortunately, GHS cannot move forward with many new initiatives housed in the old building because of the lack of adequate facilities available. For example, our Science and Technology Academy needs additional computer labs, our Broadcast Media program in the Academy of Arts & Communication needs a modernized TV studio, and our Auto Technology and Auto Body programs in the Academy of Business Studies desperately need new equipment to expand their programs. None of these projects are feasible in the existing building. None realistically would be funded before modernization.

*

*

*

In summary, we ask that you, collectively with the Board of Education, commit to full funding of the Board's requested CIP – not just this year, but in the “out” years as well. We encourage you to find solutions for 2010 and beyond. Gaithersburg does not want to be next year's Paint Branch (we've been delayed several times already), nor do we want to be the cause of a delay for Wheaton, Seneca Valley, Wootton and the other schools behind us on the modernization schedule. I've been at these schools: they all need the modernization. The Council and the Board need to find a way to make it happen.

Once again, thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of the Gaithersburg cluster schools.