



City of Takoma Park, Maryland
Housing and Community Development Department

Memorandum

To: Peter Geiling, MCPS Real Estate Management Team Leader
From: Rosalind Grigsby, Community Development Manager
Date: January 25, 2018
Subject: Downcounty Consortium Elementary School Site Selection Advisory Committee Recommendation

On January 3, 2018, the Downcounty Consortium Elementary School Site Selection Advisory Committee recommended Forest Grove Elementary School, 9805 Dameron Drive, Silver Spring, as a new school site and MacDonald Knolls Elementary School, 100611 Tenbrook Drive, Silver Spring, as the second choice. MCPS staff ran a well-organized process and was responsive to including new properties for consideration during the selection.

As I participated in the process, however, I noted the limitations of the information provided, as well as limitations with the criteria and weighting system used. Because of these constraints, the two sites that were recommended were the only sites that could have been selected.

However, thoughtful changes to the criteria and ranking system might have resulted in sites that better meet MCPS and County goals and that would be more appropriate in densely-developed areas such as Takoma Park. My comments follow.

The Selection Committee needs more specific information regarding MCPS needs and sites.

The staff provided current and projected enrollment numbers by current boundary lines, but additional information is needed: the demographics of where students live; environmental impacts of construction; costs for replacement of parks, recreation and open space when such land is taken to be used for schools; the impact on the planned CIP projects and related costs; and the process and costs of acquisition.

Criteria and ranking system needs to align with County goals and allow for weighted scores.

Committee members are tasked with rating each site according to the following eight criteria: location, acreage, topography, access, utilities, physical condition/adjacent uses, availability and timing, and cost (with a +1, 0 or -1 for each characteristic). The criteria do not include consideration of identified County programs and goals and equity goals. The cost criteria only takes into consideration initial costs, not expected long-term or operations costs. The point system precludes using weighted criteria for significantly positive or negative factors.

The review of privately-owned sites needs to be more robust.

The committee is given little guidance regarding cost, acquisition process, timing and availability on the privately-owned parcels under consideration, and about the MCPS process for acquisition. The

opportunity to repurpose and redevelop built sites, rather than taking undeveloped land, should be pursued more systematically with full details.

The list of public sites ought to be vetted by County or municipal agencies.

The list of possible locations in this process consisted of 12 County-owned sites and five privately-owned sites. Some of the public sites were unavailable due to already approved commercial development plans or historic covenants that prevent building. Vetting by County agencies before the Committee met would have removed these sites from consideration. One of the public sites had no pedestrian access so should not have been placed into consideration. Information could have been obtained in advance from County or municipal agencies about all of the sites that could help clarify the extent to which use of the sites would be consistent with Master Plans or other plans and policies.

MCPS should develop a policy, in consultation with park agencies, about when and how to consider parkland for potential school sites.

Nine of the sites considered in this process were sites characterized as parks, recreation or open space. Particularly in densely developed, economically-poorer areas of Montgomery County, the existence of parkland becomes essential for healthful living. In these areas, criteria may need to be adjusted to discourage the use of parkland for schools. Policies or criteria developed in advance could help guide future staff and committees in the site selection process.

Takoma Park issues:

The specific concerns about the students and schools in Takoma Park are not addressed by the Committee's selection. The ramifications for the expansion project at Piney Branch Elementary School and the impact on the overcrowding at Rolling Terrace Elementary School are uncertain, even with the site selection process complete. Because of Takoma Park's location on the border of Prince George's County and Washington, D.C., future redistricting options are more constrained than in most areas of Montgomery County. Students will need a new school in or near Takoma Park or there will be a domino effect northward, requiring many students to be bused far from their homes, creating difficulties for families and a long-term expense for MCPS. Creative options for smaller, paired elementary schools (K-2 and 3-5), redeveloping commercial sites, or consideration of other non-traditional possibilities may better meet MCPS and County priorities than a standard 740-student school. The Takoma Park-Silver Spring area has many paired schools, so non-traditional arrangements may be more acceptable here than in other parts of Montgomery County.