

Notes from 2/2 Community Meeting

Instead of holding our regular meeting the PTA decided it was important to inform the GES community about what is happening with the MCPS Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and how MCPS intends to alleviate overcrowding at two neighboring elementary schools. One possible solution under consideration is to tear down and rebuild GES to accommodate more students, so we invited Adrienne Karamihas, a Capital Improvement Manager for MCPS, to explain current timelines and possible outcomes.

The meeting was called to order by PTA President Kimmi Photinakis at 7:12pm with approximately 30 people in attendance. We began the meeting with a quick icebreaker led by Ms. Bryant. Nelton Castro explained that his role as Cluster Rep is to be the liaison between GES and the Northwest Cluster. Ms. Karamihas' presentation was followed by a question and answer session, then a discussion of pros & cons facilitated by Cheryl Qassis. The meeting wrapped up at approximately 9 pm.

1. ***There are two terms floating around – capacity study and feasibility study. What is the difference?*** First is the term “capacity study” –this happens when there is more than one school within a cluster that is over capacity. For this purpose, we are looking at the cluster as a whole. The Superintendent recommended a capacity study to address a cluster wide issue at the elementary school level. Matsunaga is over capacity by about 350 kids, Great Seneca Creek (GSC) is over about 100 kids. When MCPS is looking at different options to solve a cluster wide issue – that’s a capacity study. The feasibility study is an actual process that results from the capacity study. During a feasibility study MCPS hires an architect, gets the community involved in designing the specifics of new school buildings and needs of the school community. It is a long process, with lots of meetings involving the whole community.
2. ***What is recommended for GES?*** There is nothing currently recommended. As a result of the capacity study, which indicated significant overcrowding at Matsunaga and GSC, MCPS has proposed a feasibility study. MCPS is currently awaiting funding for the feasibility study from the County Council. The fiscal year begins July 1st, and the feasibility study must be funded prior to then in order to begin.
3. ***What are the specifics of the feasibility study proposed?*** There are three options in the proposed feasibility study. Option A entails the building of a new elementary school on undeveloped land in the Northwest Cluster to accommodate 640-740 students. Option B entails the tear down of Germantown Elementary School and rebuilding a new school at the current GES site to house approximately 700-740 students. Option C entails building an addition onto GSC to hold approx. 100 additional students. One option, a combination of options or a new option not previously discussed may be part of the final outcome.
4. ***How long does the feasibility study take?*** Typically feasibility studies are not done in the summer, but usually occur during the school year. Assuming the study is funded for this coming fiscal year, the study would begin in the fall of 2010 and typically take about a year to complete.

5. ***How specifically will the study work?*** There would be three different studies (one for each option) occurring simultaneously. The study starts with a pre-meeting including the school principal, PTA president and a staff representative. These people work with MCPS to choose the architect who performs the feasibility study. (As the Option B portion of the study addresses the tear down & rebuild of GES, the Option B study will focus on the design of the proposed new school.) Once the architect is chosen they will lead the study. Every other week for 3-5 months there will be meetings with the architect for input which are all inclusive, open to all community members and staff. The architect takes input from all of the community meetings to formulate a plan, including any issues that are raised during the design process. The last community meeting will have presentation of the proposed new site plan that will be given to the Superintendent. The superintendent reviews all possible projects up for funding for the year and offers his recommendation as to which feasibility study option he prefers.
6. ***What is the cost of the feasibility study?*** There is no set budget for the rebuild in a feasibility study. MCPS is more interested in getting the right school for the right place & population.
7. ***Why were these options proposed?*** The only option easily available to expand GSC is to add the 4 classrooms. After that addition, there will be no extra room to expand GSC. Matsunaga is maxed out.
8. ***Why were no options proposed to expand GES?*** Options were looked at a couple of years ago before Matsunaga was built but there were no viable options. A second story cannot be added because of structural issues. GES cannot expand out any further without losing parking lots.
9. ***Why GES? How did GES get picked?*** These options came from the management group and were presented to Superintendent. Only a couple of schools are available in the cluster for options as far as helping to relieve overcrowding. Darnestown is also small, but cannot increase capacity. Clopper Mill is a little larger school (500+ students), but it is a Title 1 school so is exempt from adverse impact. MCPS has two ideal elementary school capacities, either 640 or 740 students. GES is under capacity and still has enough property to build a larger school.
10. ***If a new school is built, how will the students be assigned?*** If the rebuilding happens, there would be a boundary study to enroll the school. Boundary studies do not begin until a year before the school opens. Students could be drawn from GES, Matsunaga, GSC and possibly McNair.
11. ***Where do the kids go during demolition and how long will it take?*** The whole student body and staff will be relocated to a holding facility for the duration of construction. There is 1 facility in Rockville, 1 in Potomac, and 2 in Silver Spring. These are former schools that are now vacant. The kids would be bused to the assigned holding facility. Once the feasibility study is completed, the superintendent makes his recommendation and the County Council funds the rebuild, it will take 2 years to plan, then 2 years to construct. It may be possible, but highly unlikely, to look at building on site and staying on site, which would be determined during the feasibility study.

12. ***If Option A is chosen (New School/New Site) how will that affect GES?*** If a new school is built, GES will not be up for a modernization any time soon. Student population could potentially increase based on the results of any boundary study.
13. ***Why would MCPS undertake a tear down & rebuild when new construction is cheaper and easier? Why was no land set aside during the housing boom?*** The cost for a tear down/rebuild is actually quite comparable to the cost of building a new school. Montgomery County has a formula that requires developers to hold open land for a school site when the development is large enough. In order to get a school site in a neighborhood there needs to be a huge number of houses built. For example, Arora Hills and Clarksburg Town Center were the last developments large enough to qualify under the formula.
14. ***Why pursue the tear down/rebuild option when it adds only 350 seats, and the affected schools are more than 450 kids over capacity?*** There may be no land available for a new school in our cluster. MCPS owns some property in Germantown, but Adrienne was not sure of the exact location. Also, the proposed addition at Great Seneca Creek could house approx. 100 students, thereby reducing the number of students over capacity to 350.
15. ***What happens to the other schools in our cluster that are overcrowded?*** In the meantime the other schools will continue to be overcrowded. An elementary school must be at least 92 students over capacity to be included in a capacity study. Right now middle school enrollment is declining. Middle Schools are slightly overcrowded but there is much more opportunity to be flexible with space because the students change classes so much. How current is the forecast out? HS & MS forecasting is fungible because it is done out until 2024.
16. ***When will we have the opportunity for input?*** During the feasibility study the community will have option to do pros & cons on a rebuild through testifying at cluster hearings and sending letters and comments to Board of Ed. (The actual feasibility study is not the vehicle to discuss pros and cons, only bricks and mortar.) Once the Superintendent makes his recommendation at the end of the feasibility study, there will be public hearings held by the Board of Ed and the County Council. There will be opportunity to testify for or against the recommendation at these hearings.

Ms. Bryant reminded everyone that, as a MCPS employee, it is not her place to have a position on this issue. She will support the final decision and make it work. Nelton Castro wrapped up the meeting with next steps which includes the need to prepare cluster testimony by February 10th.

Summary of Pros & Cons Discussion

Option A – New school/New Site	
Pro	Con
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 700 kids housed • increase area schools – 2 for the price of 1 • Cost could be lower than Option B • No disruption to GES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarce available land • GES does not get modernized for quite some time
Option B – Tear down & expand	
Pro	Con
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmentally up to date • Better facilities w/ more technology in each classroom • More opportunities for different needs/ More students might mean more ability to accommodate out of grade level learning such as an “in house” Math 7 class • Larger schools aren’t as easy a target for staffing cuts • Energy costs will be a fraction of current, leaving budget for other things like teachers • Prevent over development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adding 300 students, need 450 – just shifting the problems • Displacing the kids for 2 years (to holding school in Rockville?) • Large number of kids makes it harder for staff to be personally involved, not as much personal attention • Increase in traffic & congestion • Disruption to students & families schedules • GES historical relevance • Smaller school is more conducive to learning • Lose strong sense of community • Smaller school allows staff to recognize small issues and achievements • Population cycles – in 10-20 years will we have a surplus of small schools?