July 23, 2015

Patricia O’Neil, President
Montgomery County Board of Education

Dear Ms. O’Neil:

We are writing to express our concerns about the recent review of the new BCC Middle School and to offer some constructive suggestions on how the design process for new schools might be improved.

As you probably know, the Planning Board considered the new BCC Middle School at its regular meeting on March 26, 2015. The Board ultimately voted to support the Mandatory Referral application and transmit comments to MCPS, but it expressed concerns about the design of the building and configuration of driveways, retaining walls, and other aspects of the site. The Commissioners also approved the Preliminary Forest Conservation Plan (PFCP) with the condition that significant changes needed to be made in order to save more trees and minimize the use of retaining walls. Unlike the advisory Mandatory Referral process, the PFCP imposes substantive requirements for the protection of trees. At the direction of the Board, the Planning staff approved the PFCP — following modifications by MCPS staff — by letter on May 28.

The Planning staff and the Planning Board have understood since the inception of this project that the BCC Middle School is vitally important in order to address future capacity needs and relieve current overcrowding in the cluster. At the same time, the staff and Board have wanted to encourage MCPS to incorporate design features that will make the new school an asset to the community. As you know, neighboring property owners had significant concerns about the design of the school – particularly the access points, the height of the retaining walls, and the loss of trees. The Planning staff also had major concerns, which we communicated to MCPS staff more than a year ago. Unfortunately, MCPS staff expressed little willingness to consider deviations from the plans that had been prepared. Efforts by the Planning staff to suggest alternative designs – months before the Mandatory Referral hearing – were dismissed, which meant our staff found themselves unable to make the necessary forest conservation finding that MCPS had done all that it could to save as many trees as possible and reduce imperviousness. In
retrospect, it seems clear that the process for the BCC Middle School didn’t serve the public or our respective agencies very well and the final design is disappointing.

Some of the specific examples that Planning staff suggested to improve this project included:

- To reduce impervious asphalt, the staff proposed that MCPS consider painting the basketball courts onto the bus loading area, which is only used for loading and unloading twice a day, immediately before and after school is in session. The courts are exactly as long as the bus loading is wide, and the Planning staff noted that using the space for basketball courts, which could be done except during the time needed for bus pickups and drop offs, would reduce the amount of impervious surface on the site, create more space and allow flexibility for the alignment of other driveways, and reduce costs.

- In order to reduce on-site parking and impervious surface - which would reduce the limits of disturbance, save forest, and reduce the height of retaining walls – the Planning Staff suggested that approximately 20 on-street parking spaces be provided on the northern side of Saul Road. In this configuration, the on-street parking could become the queuing space for afternoon pickups.

- The Planning staff asked MCPS to consider some below-grade parking for the site. The site is steeply sloped and offers an opportunity to tuck parking below the building due to excavation that is required with the existing topography. This approach would reduce the amount of surface parking and impervious surface, the height of retaining walls, and the impact on existing forest cover.

- The staff suggested making the music room and/or dining hall 15’ tall rather than 20’ tall to try to minimize exterior retaining walls. This reduced interior height would allow the western main entry to be raised at least five feet, which would reduce the need for retaining walls and the amount of proposed cut and fill.

- The staff observed that the primary public entry will face the woods to the west and not allow any view to the entry from a street. This main entry also is located on the same west elevation as the truck service drop off area, loading docks, grease interceptor, garbage storage and pick-up area, and kitchen. Given that the school will be a major new civic building, it would be more appropriate for the main entry to face the street.

Despite the Planning staff’s effort to identify issues, flag areas of concern, and suggest alternatives and solutions over a period of almost a year before the project was submitted to the Planning Board for Mandatory Referral, little if any of the staff’s input was incorporated into the building and site design. This experience demonstrates the importance of beginning a dialogue at the earliest possible point in the facility planning and design process. Too often, Planning staff works to provide feedback on school facilities that is dismissed as coming too late to be included in the design choices made by MCPS.

Planning staff is now working with MCPS staff on the Cross-Agency Work Group on Facility Design, and we are hopeful that this effort will produce improvements to the process and to the
quality of school design. Only when the Planning Department and MCPS work collaboratively and with open minds at the early stages of design can the public benefit from the expertise of both agencies.

We understand your need to provide educational facilities in a timely way and wish to support you in that endeavor. The Planning staff has significant planning and design skills that could be useful to MCPS if there is meaningful consultation early in the process. We hope that the BOE will work with the Planning Department and Planning Board to develop a more collegial and constructive process for future school facility projects.

Sincerely,

Casey Anderson, Chair
Montgomery Planning Board

Craig Rice, Councilmember
Montgomery County Council