August 17, 2015

The Honorable Craig L. Rice
Councilmember, District 2
Montgomery County Council
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Mr. Casey Anderson
Chair, Montgomery County Planning Board
Vice Chair, Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
8787 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3760

Dear Mr. Rice and Mr. Anderson:

I am writing in response to your letter of July 23, 2015, concerning planning for Bethesda-Chevy Chase Middle School #2 (B-CC MS #2). I appreciate and support the comments you make about the need for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and Montgomery County Planning Department (MCPD) staff to work closely on designing our schools. I also want to thank the Planning Board and MCPD for the approvals of the Mandatory Referral application and Preliminary Forest Conservation Plan for the B-CC MS #2 project. We acknowledge that B-CC MS #2 has been a difficult and politically charged project for both agencies, having to conduct two site selection processes and addressing numerous community concerns throughout the planning processes.

I was surprised to read that you believe that the planning process for B-CC MS #2 did not serve the public or our agencies well and that you find the current design “disappointing.” Your letter suggests that MCPS staff expressed little willingness to consider deviations from the proposed plans and that the suggested alternative designs by the MCPD staff were dismissed. This is an issue I take seriously, and I must disagree with your conclusion given what I know about the public process to plan B-CC MS #2.

As you know, B-CC MS #2 has been in various stages of planning and design for the past four years, and the project team, along with the involved stakeholders, explored many alternatives before arriving at the current design layout. During the feasibility study phase, six public meetings/work sessions were held between June 8, 2011, and August 17, 2011. Meeting times alternated between late afternoon and early evening to accommodate participation by a greater number of community members and school staff. On September 22, 2011, MCPS staff and the design team gave a presentation to the local Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the genera.
public to discuss the results of the feasibility study. There were 113 different participants in the feasibility study phase meetings/work sessions, with attendance at each meeting ranging between 23 and 57 people. It is evident that the comments from the public and stakeholders were considered in the study and are reflected in the design of the building and site, and I would encourage you to review those meeting minutes.

For the schematic design phase, four public meetings were held between September 11, 2013, and October 30, 2013, and a final presentation was made to the PTA and the public on November 12, 2013. Again, meeting times alternated between late afternoon and early evening to accommodate participation by a greater number of community members and school staff. Subsequent to the completion of schematic design, the preliminary plans were approved by the Montgomery County Board of Education on January 14, 2014. This meeting was posted and advertised in full accordance with the Maryland Open Meetings Act. The agenda was posted on the MCPS website and the Board of Education’s BoardDocs site, and was shared via e-mail and social media. Following the Board’s approval, the engineering and design of the project proceed based on the approved preliminary plans.

Project information was publicly available on the MCPS Division of Construction (DOC) website, including meeting minutes, presentations, concepts, and designs. The information that was posted during the feasibility study and the schematic design phases remains on the DOC website today. It can be found at the following web link:

[www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/facilities/construction/project/bethesdams.aspx](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/facilities/construction/project/bethesdams.aspx)

The public involvement process has been extensive in this project. Throughout the entire three-year period of feasibility study and schematic design processes, a total of 12 meetings (7 meetings during feasibility study and 5 meetings during schematic design phases) were held with the involved stakeholders. The records indicate that only one staff member from the MCPD attended only one work session meeting, despite being invited to every meeting. Moreover, MCPD staff did not submit any comments or express any concerns until May 2014, after the Mandatory Referral application was submitted. In a complex project such as B-CC MS #2, it would be difficult for one to fully understand the entire project and all involved stakeholders’ viewpoints without being involved early in the process and throughout the planning phases. We certainly regret that MCPD did not attend most of those early meetings to which they were invited, and in the future, we look forward to a new process that ensures greater collaboration at the onset of a project. However, at this time, while MCPS staff and other involved stakeholders appreciate the MCPD staff suggestions on B-CC #2, many of the suggested recommendations by MCPD already were explored and considered during the planning process.

I fully understand that the Planning Board and MCPD staff hold the authority to issue permits on Forest Conservation Plans and the important responsibility to ensure that Forest Conservation laws are interpreted correctly and applied in a consistent manner for all projects. It also is important to
recognize that all projects should be viewed in respect to many other codes and regulations, not only from the Forest Conservation perspective. In many cases, various codes and regulations conflict, and the project team has to resolve these potential conflicts creatively while ensuring that the safety and security aspects are not compromised and the project is in compliance with all applicable codes to obtain many different permits. This is further reason that earlier engagement by the MCPD staff and other permitting agencies are critical to the success of a project.

In addition, I believe it is important to be clear that honest differences in design approaches can and will occur during complex construction projects. Please know that the suggestions by MCPD staff were not dismissed out of hand. Rather, any suggestions that were offered were carefully considered, and in certain cases were indeed incorporated into the current design. The Mandatory Referral review process as well as our staff meetings to discuss Forest Conservation and the overall project generated a number of ideas that MCPS adopted, including:

- swap of locations for the tennis courts and basketball courts to preserve and expand the existing forested area;
- reduce the width of the westernmost driveway from 24 feet to 20 feet wide to pull the limit of disturbance four feet further away from the existing stream buffer;
- provide bike racks at multiple locations;
- realign the crosswalk on Saul Road;
- plant additional trees and landscaping along the Saul Road and Haverhill Drive.

MCPS staff accepted these and other MCPD staff suggestions, but where they did not incorporate MCPD design recommendations into the project there were clear issues that would have, from a school perspective, either compromised student safety and security or not enhanced the overall construction project. I asked our staff to provide the specific reasons why they did not adopt the MCPD staff recommendations referenced in your letter, and I have enclosed those responses to this letter. As you can see, we believe the decisions we made were in the best interest of the safety and well-being of our students, staff, and the community, as well as the overall success of the project.

The MCPS Department of Facilities Management staff also presented the detailed facts of the project along with the comparison analysis of the two options, the currently approved design and the MCPD staff suggested alternative design, to the Planning Board and the MCPD staff during the Mandatory Referral Hearing. The comparison analysis clearly demonstrated that the currently approved design (1) saves more existing forested area, (2) saves more significant trees on site, (3) requires less amount and lower heights of retaining walls, (4) accommodates more vehicle staging on site, and (5) minimizes overall impact to the neighborhood.

The MCPS school design process includes extensive opportunities for involvement from many stakeholders, including neighboring communities, educators, and governmental agencies who are invited to the design meetings. Planning staff from the MCPD also are invited to community
meetings and provide input. The project team uses an iterative approach to school design and present numerous design modifications at the suggestion of communities, educational program staff, governmental representatives, and MCPD staff. This open process of school design was followed for B-CC MS #2. I am, therefore, particularly concerned by the conclusion you reach in your letter that states the school design process “didn’t serve the public or our respective agencies very well and the final design is disappointing.” Based on what I have described above, I come to a very different conclusion than yours. I contend the school’s design process worked very well to gather and reflect input provided by many stakeholders. In addition, I believe we have designed a beautiful facility that will be a lasting asset to the community.

More broadly, you expressed a general concern in your letter about the level of collaboration between MCPS, MCPD, and the Planning Board. I agree that collaboration is extremely important, and so it is particularly disheartening to be charged with a lack of collaboration on our end. I know that MCPS has participated in numerous meetings on the B-CC MS #2 project with MCPD staff, and I believe that the honest disagreements over design approaches are now being interpreted as a failure to collaborate. This simply was not the case, and we should not let disagreements over approaches to design be conflated with issues of process.

In fact, as it became clear there were unresolved issues with B-CC MS #2, Mr. Larry A. Bowers, interim superintendent of schools, requested a meeting with Mr. Anderson; Ms. Gwen Wright, MCPD director; and Mr. Keith Levchenko, County Council staff assistant, to discuss the project together in a good faith effort at cross-agency collaboration. I understand from Mr. Bowers that he worked with all parties to establish a time to meet on April 28, 2015, but when it came time to meet, Mr. Anderson did not attend the meeting. This was an important meeting on an important project, and in retrospect it would have been good for Mr. Anderson to have attended this meeting, as Mr. Bowers had requested.

The meeting that Mr. Bowers convened and subsequent staff meetings resulted in an agreement for MCPS and MCPD staff to engage earlier in the planning and design processes and also consider a conceptual plan review prior to the Mandatory Referral application. Subsequent meetings at the staff level identified ways to enhance collaboration on school projects and the communication among our staffs, so that MCPD staff can provide input early in the planning phase of projects as design options are being developed. Attendance by MCPD planners at the community design meetings, as noted above, will continue to be an important avenue for input at the outset of school design. It is my understanding that staff from both agencies have committed to improve collaboration, communication, and our processes for working together. Therefore, your letter of concern and disappointment is a bit unexpected at this stage given the meeting Mr. Bowers held and the commitment we have made to working with MCPD even more closely in the future.

As the Board of Education and the Planning Board have been meeting on an annual basis for the past several years, the Board of Education has been and continues to value the relationship with the Planning Board and is committed to working together for the betterment of the county.
I would like to offer an invitation to both of you to meet with me and Mr. Bowers to clear misunderstandings and ensure we all share the same visions. Thank you for your consideration of my comments and your support of our public schools.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Patricia B. O'Neill
President

PBO:AMZ:lsh

Enclosure

Copy to:
Members of the Montgomery County Council
Members of the Montgomery County Planning Board
Members of the Board of Education
Mr. Bowers
Dr. Navarro
Dr. Statham
Dr. Zuckerman
Ms. Turner-Little
Mr. Crispell
Mr. Song
Mr. Ikheloa
Responses to the Planning Staff Recommendations on Bethesda-Chevy Chase
Middle School #2

Planning Staff Recommendation #1

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.

MCPS Response to Recommendation #1

Very early in both the project’s feasibility study and design phases, consideration was given to striping the bus entrance and staging area for the shared use of activities requiring paved surfaces. Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) makes every effort to minimize cost and environmental impact by reducing impervious surface in all of our school projects. In fact, multi-use pavement has been employed for years in the design of our schools. Examples of this can be found at, among other schools, Damascus Elementary School, Darnestown Elementary School, and Cresthaven Elementary School.

Proper school site planning and design must not only seek to reduce cost, minimize impervious areas, and preserve forest, but must, above all else, ensure the safety of those who will use our schools and their amenities. Basketball courts and other such paved play areas are part of our educational programs. While these areas are used primarily during school hours, they are also available for after-hour and weekend community use.

To ensure the safety of those who might use the basketball courts, it would be necessary to fence or gate off access to the bus loop to keep vehicular traffic out of the bus loading/basketball area during the school day, after hours, and on weekends. Unfettered vehicular access must be maintained for after-hour activities, bus loading operations, and for parking for after-hour school and community activities and events. Blocking entry to the bus loop would not comply with The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) mandate that handicap parking and loading be provided near the main building entrance and provide an unrestricted direct route to the building entrance and site amenities.

Basketball poles and goals cannot be located in the driveway as the goals are lower in height than the buses. The goals must be set back from the curb at least 4 feet so that they are not struck by buses. This places the poles in the center of the sidewalks used to load and unload students. The demand for parking for after school and community events can be significant. To minimize overflow parking on adjacent streets, the bus loading area is double-striped to provide significant after-school hours and weekend parking.
As we always have, MCPS chose student and community safety and ADA compliant access by creating a separate safe area for the basketball courts.

**Planning Staff Recommendation #2**

*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.*

**MCPS Response to Recommendation #2**

Again, proper school site planning and design must not only seek to reduce cost, minimize impervious areas and preserve forest, but must, above all else, ensure the safety of those who will use our schools and their amenities. To properly design these facilities it is imperative that designers understand and anticipate how these facilities will actually be used. Even prior to Planning Staff’s suggestion to provide street-side parking, representatives of the Division of Construction, the design team, the MCPS Department of Transportation, and the Montgomery County Department of Transportation, Division of Traffic Engineering and Operations discussed the feasibility of adding curbside parking along both Saul Road and Haverhill Drive. Again, safety was the over-arching driver in expert’s decision to not provide curbside parking along adjoining streets. The following are few reasons for not recommending the street parking:

- Widening the streets to add a parking lane would result in the loss of all existing mature street trees along the entire length of the widening. The MCPS plan moves the limit of disturbance into the site away from the street to minimize the loss of street trees.
- While on-site pavement may be reduced, off-site pavement will be increased.
- Under the current MCPS site design, stormwater runoff from all impervious areas of the site is collected and treated on-site to the maximum extent practicable via Environmental Site Design (ESD) supplemented by below-grade, non-ESD structural storage and treatment facilities. Adding a paved parking lane to the existing street pavement will significantly increase the amount of uncontrolled, untreated runoff to the stream and its buffer.
- Adding a parking lane along the north side of the streets between the site driveway entrances would prevent adequate sight distance by blocking the views of both pedestrians and vehicles on the streets.
- The intent of the current plan is to channel all student drop-off traffic into a protected on-site drop-off area to minimize on-street queuing. Providing a curbside lane encourages parents to drop their children off along the street in an unsafe manner. This will further complicate traffic patterns, add to traffic congestion, and further endanger those using crosswalks.
- Using the drop-off for queuing only works if no one is parked in that lane when queuing is needed.
- Representatives of the Montgomery County Department of Transportation Division of
Traffic Engineering and Operations advised MCPS that they would not support the addition of parking along the street.

- Signage restricting stopping or standing in this lane is not a deterrent.
- Relying upon street-side parking to meet on-site parking requirements only works until the neighborhood successfully petitions the County to establish a parking zone in that area.

Planning Staff Recommendation #3

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.

MCPS Response to Recommendation #3

The feasibility study meeting minutes document that the feasibility of parking beneath the building was discussed and explored with the community at the very first public meeting. The feasibility of incorporating below-grade parking either under the building and/or beneath the fields was indeed considered at the onset of the feasibility study and again during the development of schematic designs. It is important to note that while parking structures are significantly far more costly than surface parking and retaining walls, cost was not the only factor in the decision to not construct a parking structure either beneath the school building or beneath the fields.

The feasibility of constructing a below-grade parking structure under the athletic fields was considered by the design team and was eliminated from consideration for the following reasons:

- The primary reason that parking under the fields was eliminated from consideration was that placing the structure beneath the fields would displace approximately 75 percent of the field area required for the installation and operation of the geo-thermal exchange well system that will provide long-term energy-efficient heating and cooling for the school.
- Overall facility energy consumption, required to power independent garage lighting, fire protection and ventilation intake and exhaust systems would increase.
- Ramps required for vehicular access to the below-grade parking structure will further reduce available green space.
- Because the entire structure would be below grade, all of its walls would have to be designed as retaining walls capable of resisting lateral earth loads. The design team estimated that such a structure would add over 1,000 linear feet of 18 foot high buried retaining wall to the project and require the excavation and removal of over 40,000 cubic yards of earth from the site.
- Some site and building retaining walls, driveways, and surface parking would still be required for visitor parking, bus staging, deliveries, student drop-off, fire and emergency vehicle access to the building and site, and for after-hours community use of the schools, fields and other site amenities.
Consideration was also given also to the feasibility of tucking a row of at-grade parking spaces under the edge of the structure beneath the building. This concept was eliminated from consideration early in the design process for the following reasons:

- Student, pedestrian and traffic safety was the primary reason for not tucking a row of parking spaces beneath the building.
- It is imperative that students be dropped off on a curbed sidewalk to prevent vehicles from striking them as they walk along the sidewalk from cars to the main school entrance. This alone precludes tucking a row of parking spaces under the building.
- To maximize on-site queuing in the student drop-off and to minimize traffic queuing on Saul Road, the student drop-off lane must extend on-site as far from Saul Road as possible along the length of the school.
- Tucking a row of parking under the edge of the building does not facilitate safe, efficient, and timely student drop-off and pick up operations. It is imperative that vehicles not cross through the drop-off area to access or depart from their parking spaces. To prevent this it would be necessary to push the drop-off sidewalk and driveway under the building as well. This would force students to walk through the underground parking area to enter the school.
- The administration suite and main entry must be located centrally within the drop off area to enable drop-off and pick-up activities to be visually monitored to ensure the safety of students and staff.
- Recessing parking under the building would create secluded areas that are virtually impossible to monitor or secure to prevent undesirable after hour activity. Such a condition would unnecessarily put student and staff welfare in jeopardy. This is unacceptable at all levels.

The design team also considered feasibility of adding a full level of parking under the building. The following considerations led to the decision to not provide a full level of underground parking beneath the building.

- The column grid for a school is very different than that of a parking structure. To accommodate both, it would be necessary to create a system of deep transfer beams over the entire parking structure to support the building and transfer loads from the school onto the column grid for the garage.
- To facilitate timely and safe emergency evacuation, spaces that allow for a large congregation of people such as the student dining area must be located at the ground level with exits to grade at various locations along the length of the school.
- Activity areas that rely upon frequent deliveries and pick-ups, such as the kitchen, or areas that require regular access for maintenance and other activities such as recycling and disposal must be located on the ground level with access to grade.
- Constructing a full level of underground parking beneath the building would double the height and length, and increase the thickness, of below-grade building retaining walls. Accordingly these walls would become thicker and their foundations much larger to support the building, parking and resist lateral earth pressures.
• Lowering the grade at the west main entrance to the school will introduce an additional 18 feet in elevation change between the front and the back of the school requiring higher site retaining walls and stairs to accommodate the increased grade change.

• A parking garage under the building would require significantly more energy consumption for lighting, fire protection, electrical and its independent ventilation system for intake and exhaust. It also would add additional costs to create sound and fire separation between the parking and the classroom spaces above.

Planning Staff Recommendation #4

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.

MCPS Response

The design team also evaluated this recommendation and reported that the site topography and building plans clearly show that raising the elevation of the ground-level main entry 5’ will increase the numbers, lengths, and heights of site retaining walls and steepen driveways.

The elevations at the west entrance to the ground floor and at the east entrance to the first floor were set to work with existing topography and to achieve taller ceiling heights of the music suite and multi-purpose room to improve acoustics. Accordingly, driveway grades, as currently designed, are at their maximum and cannot be increased. Raising the ground floor to achieve the 5-foot reduction is not possible. Likewise, lowering the building’s first floor to achieve the 5-foot height reduction in the music suite and multi-purpose room would result in the need to lower all the grades in front of the building an additional 5 feet. Lowering site grades at the front of the building 5 feet will introduce additional retaining walls, ADA compliant ramps and stairs to make up the increased grade difference between the bus loop and the fields. Reducing the heights of these rooms by five feet would not only sacrifice proper acoustics, but would increase amount and heights of site retaining walls and steepen driveways beyond their acceptable maximum.

Planning Staff Recommendation #5

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.

MCPS Response to Recommendation #5

The orientation of the main entry also was discussed at the meeting and resulted in two main entrances. One of the main entrances is adjacent to the bus loading area and faces the street. In
order to support the community’s desire to minimize the drop-off and pick-up traffic queuing onto the street, a second main entrance is needed at the lower level to allow parents entering the site to drop off their children. Vehicles will stop as close to the main entrance as possible causing following vehicles to stack behind them. To provide the maximum on site queuing, to facilitate visual monitoring of drop-off and pick-up activities, and to meet codes, the entrance needs to be as currently proposed by MCPS.

ADA regulations require the parking spaces be provided as close as possible to the main entrance of the school and that they be constructed such that the maximum grades in any direction across those spaces not exceed 2 percent in slope. Additionally, the ADA requires that an accessible handicap loading area be provided as close as possible to the main entrance to the building. Again, grades in this area must not exceed 2 percent in slope. Additional tall retaining walls would be required to meet these code requirements.