

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

September 10, 2020

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Montgomery County Planning Board Mandatory Referral Presentation—
Charles W. Woodward High School Reopening Project

To address the urgent space needs at Walter Johnson High School and the Downcounty Consortium high schools, County Council approved funding to reopen Charles W. Woodward High School in May 2018. The Board of Education also approved on March 25, 2019, that Charles W. Woodward High School be used as a holding school for Northwood High School for two years, beginning in September 2023 (Resolution No. 220-19).

The project to reopen Charles W. Woodward High School is complex due in part to the multiple objectives and interests embedded in the project scope. These include the need for increased high school capacity across multiple cluster areas; the interest in incorporating a significant programmatic focus in conjunction with work on secondary arts programming in Montgomery County Public Schools; residential housing development pressures in the surrounding areas; and the need for Charles W. Woodward High School to serve as a temporary holding center for Northwood High School during its construction.

During the course of significant community engagement and input by a variety of state and local agencies, the building and site design has evolved significantly in the past 18 months. Several key milestones during this design process included:

- Development Review Committee evaluation on May 31, 2019, by the Montgomery County Planning Department;
- Preliminary Plans approval by the Board of Education on October 28, 2019, (Resolution Nos. 534-19 and 535-19) ;
- Acceptance of Mandatory Referral and Forest Conservation Plans by the Montgomery County Planning Department on April 30, 2020; and
- Mandatory Referral hearing on July 23, 2020, conducted by the Montgomery County Planning Board.

Throughout this process, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff regularly has met and communicated with staff in the Planning Department around building and site design issues. At all stages of the process MCPS staff has incorporated extensive comments, suggestions, and requests from Planning Department staff into the design of the building and site. These changes included: redesign of the site entrance; shifting the main front plaza area and offsetting the pedestrian gathering areas to a dedicated location; refining the pedestrian walk path to match building entry points; and adding a crosswalk to Old Georgetown Road in front of the site.

The complex challenges associated with this unique project continue, and the most recent developments occurred during the Montgomery County Planning Board Mandatory Referral hearing on July 23, 2020. During this hearing, Planning Board staff raised several concerns, reiterating the view that MCPS disproportionately emphasizes automotive use in project planning vehicular and pedestrian design. While the Planning Board ultimately approved the plan for reopening Charles W. Woodward High School, it did so with significant comments for consideration. Several of the primary comments provided in the letter of August 12, 2020, from Planning Board Chair Casey Anderson follow.

- Redesign the main walkway that leads from the entrance of the building to Old Georgetown Road to improve traffic safety. Redesign the walkway as shown in a sketch developed by planning staff to remove crossings of internal site roadways, reduce conflicting vehicle turning movements, simplify the complicated traffic pattern and create additional recreational space.
- Should any Park fields be needed for school use in the future, MCPS will need to work with the Department of Parks to negotiate a permitting agreement and mitigation package that will require Planning Board approval.
- Provide a formalized ADA (*Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*) compliant eight-foot wide hard-surface trail connecting the Property to an existing hard surface loop trail at Timberlawn Local Park. Construction of this trail will require an approved Park Construction Permit.
- Obtain an approved Park Construction Permit for the proposed sewer connection within Timberlawn Local Park, and for potential impacts from site grading along the park property line and/or any storm water management system improvements.
- Provide no less than 135 bicycle parking spaces around the site, which amounts to 5 percent of the anticipated enrollment. The Applicant should provide some weather protected bicycle parking facilities.
- Observe and document the degree of safety of bus movements into and out of the bus loop during pick-up and drop-off periods following the first three months of operation for the Northwood High School swing space and again following the first three months of operation for the Charles W. Woodward High School. The observation should culminate in a report, to be provided to the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) president for review. Following review, MCPS should coordinate with the PTA and/or other parties based on the findings of the report.

Many of these comments are consistent with longer term County masterplan visions and intent. While MCPS strongly supports the implementation of the County's Vision Zero policy, many of the comments that are intended to further the goals of these policies do so at the expense of operational requirements of a public high school in the current environment of the project. The challenge in designing and constructing public schools is striking a balance of designing site features that speak to a future visionary design with the need to work within current site conditions and constraints, as well as fiscal constraints of public funding.

The emphasis of the Planning Board's comments and design intent on primary pedestrian access from Old Georgetown Road reflects an effort to align with the Green Corridors recommendations in the 1992 *North Bethesda Garrett Park Master Plan*. However, given the state of Old Georgetown Road at the anticipated time of opening, MCPS strongly would discourage students from crossing this heavily traveled roadway. Reducing the student drop-off loop in order to emphasize pedestrian pathways to the front of the school can create other operational problems. Discussions with the community and with Montgomery County agencies have raised concerns about traffic backup onto Old Georgetown Road, and about parents/guardians dropping students off in the parking lot across the street or on adjacent neighborhood streets to save time rather than waiting in traffic. In order to avoid parents/guardians from creating alternate offsite drop-off spots in these locations, the drop-off area in front of the building must be able to accommodate the needed amount of traffic. The current design balances pedestrian and bicycle access with that of anticipated morning and afternoon vehicular traffic patterns.

As Ms. Gwen Wright, planning director, has stated, the approach taken to providing comments and requirements through Mandatory Referral is consistent with that taken in reviewing and directing projects through private developers. However, as a public agency, MCPS is not a private developer and can work through a collaborative approach that envisions future project work and modifications as the design vision of the surrounding area of operations takes shape. MCPS continually works to evolve the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) to implement changes to our school sites that support the County's Master Plan and community initiatives. *Safe Access to Schools* and *Building Modifications and Program Improvements* are examples of CIP projects that achieve these goals at dates and times beyond that of original construction.

The sequencing and timing of project elements is a critical factor in the site planning and design. The path and walkway connecting the school and the park will necessarily be dependent on the future phases of the site buildout, which in turn will be more fully developed following engagement with the community and future funding requests. While trail connections and pathways connecting community amenities are priorities for both agencies, that work will have to be integrated into the overall project sequence moving forward.

It is our intent through project design to balance and integrate all aspects of school site operations to ensure maximum safety of all, including pedestrians, bicyclists, student drivers, bus riders, visitors, and passengers utilizing drop-off and pick-up operations. The project plans have been developed in consultation with third-party pedestrian safety and traffic engineers, parent/guardian and community representatives, MCPS Department of Transportation, Montgomery County Department of Transportation, and Montgomery County Department of Permitting. I recommend that the Board of Education continue the Charles W. Woodward High School reopening project with the plans as presented at this time.

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board reviewed the Mandatory Referral submission for the Charles W. Woodward High School reopening project on July 23, 2020; and

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board issued a letter on August 12, 2020, citing concerns related to Montgomery County Public Schools site design and recommending further revisions; and

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board has transmitted a sketch developed by staff within the Montgomery County Planning office for consideration; and

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board has outlined 15 specific comments that are to be considered for both construction implementation and future school building operational requirements; and

WHEREAS, The Board of Education has reviewed and assessed the recommendations and comments of the Montgomery County Planning Board; now therefore be it

Resolved, That the Board of Education approve the continuance of plans as designed to assure the Charles W. Woodward High School reopening project maintains all safety, operational, and programmatic goals, standards, and requirements; and be it further

Resolved, That a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the Montgomery County Planning Board.

JRS:MBM:DGT:EM:SPA:dlg