

School Officials Discuss Planning Challenges at EBCA Forum

A spike in enrollment among elementary schools in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster has prompted planning officials to address what could be a long-term shortage of space in the region. Bruce Crispell and Frank Stetson of the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) briefed residents on the situation and answered questions at an EBCA-sponsored forum, held November 10 at the Lynnbrook Recreation Center.

The officials emphasized what has not changed: Parents will continue to have the option of selecting one of three elementary schools—Bethesda, Chevy Chase, and North Chevy Chase—for a child who completes second grade at Rosemary Hills Elementary School.

But they also said that a decision by the school superintendent to end an “informal agreement” allowing children in grades K-2 to transfer into Bethesda Elementary School is the current policy. The decision was announced in a memorandum dated July 29, 2008.

As a result, the process for transferring into Bethesda Elementary School is now the same as it is for transfers across Montgomery County—a family has to demonstrate a hardship. Families with a first-grader or second-grader at Bethesda Elementary may be granted transfers for a sibling, noted Dr. Stetson, who is Community Superintendent.

Mr. Crispell, who directs long-range planning, said that an unexpected rise in enrollment has created a severe shortage of space in a number of MCPS schools. Elementary schools have been hit hard, and forecasts are projecting that the trend will continue. In addition to increased births, more people are simply coming into the public schools, he said.

Over the course of an hour, the officials described planned capacity studies to assess the space shortage and how these may lead to changes in boundaries and school assignments. Boundary changes would likely take five years to implement, even under the most optimistic time frame. In the mean time, portables, or relocatables, would be needed to meet the increased demand for space, because building additions to schools takes three years.

The first step is the capacity studies, which develop rough designs for additions and cost estimates to assess the feasibility of adding on to schools. The school superintendent recommended including them as part of the FY 2010 budget and they have since been approved by the Board of Education. These studies are scheduled to begin July 1, 2009 and will be completed the following June.

One scenario has the process unfolding like this: Capacity studies are completed in June 2010; boundary studies start in February 2011 and last several months. A report is sent to the superintendent in June 2011, who makes recommendations in the fall. The recommendations are reviewed publicly and input is sought from the community. The Board of Education could approve changes that would be effective in the fall of 2012.

The officials cautioned that in all likelihood the process will take longer, and they need the results of the initial studies to move ahead.

“Once the capacity studies are completed, we’ll know how much space needs to be added,” said Mr. Crispell. “We just don’t know if we can solve the problem with portables until we do the studies.” Bethesda Elementary has four portables on site this school year, and North Chevy Chase and Rosemary Hills have them as well.

The reassignment to Bradley Hills Elementary of some families in the western part of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster area was mentioned as part of a long-term solution. A feasibility study underway for an addition at Bradley Hills Elementary School was recently expanded to determine whether additional classrooms could be built to accommodate students from the western portion of the area.

The pairing of Rosemary Hills elementary with three other schools was also discussed. Mr. Crispell said that the arrangement was “unusual” and that it was clearly the intention moving forward to consider unifying the Bethesda-Chevy Chase pairings. He referred to a section in the supplement entitled “Commitment to Paired Schools” and highlighted the following paragraph:

It is important to note that there is no intention to end the pairings at Rosemary Hills Elementary School and Chevy Chase and North Chevy Chase elementary schools through planning activities outlined in this supplement. On the other hand, when student assignments are reviewed in the future for Bethesda Elementary School, *consideration must be given to providing a consistent assignment for all students within the Bethesda Elementary School service area and ending the split articulations that exist today* for many of these students and addressing the split articulation to two middle schools that exists today for Bethesda Elementary School students. [Italics added]

The question of re-opening Lynnbrook Elementary School was raised, and this does not appear to be under consideration. Dr. Stetson pointed out that the existing structure would most likely have to be torn down and built anew to meet current regulations. It is more cost effective to build additions onto existing schools, he said.

On November 20, 2008 the MCPS Board of Education passed Supplement A: Amendments to the FY 2009–2014 CIP Planning for Bethesda-Chevy Chase Cluster Elementary Schools. The EBCA Education Committee will present an update on next steps and results from our community survey at the December 17th General Membership meeting