

June 25, 2014

Abby Raphael, Chair
Arlington Public Schools
1426 North Quincy Street
Arlington, VA 22207

Dear Chair Raphael,

I am writing on behalf of the Jamestown Elementary School PTA to ask that the board address at the upcoming July 1st meeting the question of how APS will provide middle school capacity in north Arlington to avoid serious overcrowding. Please allow me to explain why we are making this request, and why we are seeking further information from the Board.

APS staff and the Board emphasized throughout the 2014 Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) process that north Arlington middle schools were headed for substantial overcrowding. Your January 16, 2014 letter to the community about the 2014 CIP process states in relevant part:

Following approval of the 2012 School Bond referendum ... APS staff updated its analysis of the future shortage of seats for students, as they do during the years between each CIP process. The revised data shows:

- *By FY 2019, elementary schools will have a 470-seat shortage countywide, which is 3% of all elementary seats.*
- *By FY 2019, middle schools will have a shortage of 960 seats countywide, which is 16% of all middle school seats.*
- *By FY 2024, APS projects a ... 24% shortage in middle school seats.¹*

The various CIP presentations given by staff through the year-long CIP process consistently projected that Williamsburg will be overcrowded by 328 students by 2018, and Swanson will have 378 more students than capacity by that year. Five years later, in 2023, Williamsburg will have 501 students more than its capacity, and Swanson will be overcapacity by 411 students.²

The statistical analysis posted by APS this spring states that Williamsburg, even with its current endowment of eight trailers, will be at 104.7% of capacity this coming

¹ <http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/110/2014%20January%20CIP%20Letter.pdf>

² See slide 7 of the Superintendent's proposal. Online at: http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/110/050814%20SB%20Meeting%20Supt%202014%20CIP%20Recommendations_FINAL_1405083.pdf

school year, 111.6% in 2015, 120.3% in 2016, 125.5% in 2017 and 132.9% in 2018.³ Swanson's numbers are worse by several percentage points.

Throughout the 2014 CIP process, we were encouraged by the School Board's steady emphasis on addressing the north Arlington middle school capacity problem alongside other key needs for elementary and high school capacity, and ongoing maintenance and modernization. The Superintendent's May 8th recommended CIP and every subsequent presentation to the public included at least \$117 million for middle school investment over the next 10 years, spread across several two-year CIP phases, but starting now.

The Superintendent's proposal called for approximately \$43 million of the \$117 total price tag for middle school construction funding to be included in the 2014 CIP, with the remaining sums to be covered by later CIP bond issuances.⁴ Subsequent presentations on the CIP during May and early June were changed to show some of the middle school construction funding shifted from the 2014 CIP to the 2016 CIP, but all included at least \$9 million in middle school construction funding in the 2014 CIP.⁵

Funding at the level recommended by the Superintendent was characterized as substantial, but acknowledged not to be fully adequate to address all middle school overcrowding. Nevertheless, construction funding for middle school capacity was at least \$117 million under any scenario given serious consideration by the Board or staff in any public forum. Middle school construction funding was part of every presentation on the 2014 CIP. We were never advised that capital funding might be zeroed out from the current CIP for any reason. There seemed no reason for us to doubt that the Board would act to include capital funding in the 2014 CIP in an amount scaled to begin promptly to tackle the middle school capacity problem.

But then, in the hours before the last work session on June 10th, and less than a week before the Board's June 16th vote on the 2014 CIP, the Board dropped all middle school capital funding, except for a remnant \$4 million to be spent on planning, the results of which will apparently be delayed until well after the CIP, if approved by the County, is presented to the voters.

However beneficial that additional process may turn out to be, it is not a substitute for capital funds now to expand our middle schools. The next CIP is two years

³ http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/110/Capacity_Utilization14-23_Revised_Final.pdf

⁴ See slides 50 and 51 of the Superintendent's proposal. Online at: http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/110/050814%20SB%20Meeting%20Supt%202014%20CIP%20Recommendations_FINAL_1405083.pdf

⁵ See, for example, the presentation used at the May 27, 2014 APS work session. Online at: http://www.apsva.us/cms/lib2/VA01000586/Centricity/Domain/110/052714%20SB_WorkSession3_ICC1_Final_Revised_v1.pdf

away. By all evidence from APS's own analyses, two years will be a hurtful delay for the educational experience of our middle school students. The construction funding went away, but the time-critical problem it was meant to address did not. To quote again from your January letter:

One of the most significant challenges facing Arlington Public Schools (APS) is the significant, sustained growth in our student population.

- *Between 2008 and 2013, APS enrollment has grown by 3,782 students. That is an 18% increase in just five years.*
- *We project that by 2018, we will add another 3,300 students.*
- *By 2023, it is estimated that we will grow by another 3,100 students.*

We took to heart what you said in your letter on behalf of the Board. You will understand, then, that we feel profoundly disappointed by the Board's abandonment of its pursuit of middle school capital funding in the 2014 CIP. "Sandbagged" is the description we are hearing regularly.

Yes, the "Arlington Way" properly seeks consensus on community issues. But can it really be that unresolved perspectives on how many stairs middle school students can be asked to use between classes revealed such a fundamental rift in Arlington public opinion that it made better policy entirely to drop plans to seek funds to start the construction process that would provide those and other students with classrooms? Is the admittedly unhappy prospect of changes in playing fields an adequate reason to turn aside a year of planning and good faith participation by parents and other citizens in APS-sponsored public process? The Arlington Way, as applied to the APS 2014 CIP, seems to have generated an inexplicable and counterproductive result.

What happened here?

The Board's change of position on the timing of middle school capital funding leaves us with, at a minimum, these questions for the Board and APS leadership:

- Using APS's own data, we cannot envision a way that a minimum two-year delay in seeking construction funding for middle school capacity will not guarantee overcrowding for our middle school students. Can you?
- What did the Board think would happen to the educational experience of current and future middle school students when the Board gave up on seeking capital funding for their schools in this CIP?
- What feature of the 2014 CIP should we see as offering a timely solution to the middle school problem that APS itself identified and emphasized throughout a year-long public process?

- Most simply: How do we get the middle school construction funding back on track now?

Please include in the July 1st meeting agenda an opportunity for staff and Board members to speak to these questions. Perhaps we are missing key information; we are sure we do not understand the Board's point of view. We would be pleased to learn anything that answers our questions with information that a parent of a future north Arlington middle school student will find reassuring.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

Thomas C. Jensen
President

Cc: Jamestown PTA