

Facilities Strategic Planning Community Input
January 10, 2018 6:30 p.m.
Kent County High School Auditorium

Dr. Couch introduced Dr. Lever who reviewed the attached powerpoint presentation detailing the committee findings.

The following were statements from the community:

1. Jodi Bortz read the statement below from Nathan Shroyer:
“I attended three of the facilities planning meetings.

At the final (probably most important) meeting, I was shocked how the entire effort came down to three over 65 white men who dominated the meeting. Throughout I was disappointed how little to no community and parent participation was welcomed and encouraged (especially as other community meetings I was attending in tandem on KCPS were packed, fully representative, and standing room only.

At first, when the efforts seemed to aim towards a whopping 80 million dollar investment in moving our quality middle school facility away from its very nice existing Chestertown campus, I was asking that we not pre-expend our future dollars for education too hastily.

At later meetings I was aghast how quickly the representatives from KCPS and our county administrators moved to agree with a facilities plan that only cursorily could be called “Comprehensive” and which adjusted to the lowest threshold of support for KCPS facilities.

There was zero creativity, innovation, or green opportunities generated by this plan – essentially the decision as I understand it is to fix two roofs and one hvac. This means giving attention primarily to only two of the five remaining schools and to mothball former Worton elementary. No ADA compliance for Garnet. Actually – nothing, zip for Garnet or Rock Hall.

This for me is a sad reminder that like a math equation – if you put in a certain formulaic ‘weight’ to a planning process you will only end up with the available number of results. In this case, ‘no investment needed.’

Little to no engagement (of a currently very engaged public) on the subject of our schools; taken together with a stacked committee of people clearly not interested in innovation or creative redesign solutions – who were primarily interested in drawing down the ‘bottom line’ to the least necessary investment possible to satisfy state DOE and health standards – we got what the CC and BOE wanted when this committee was formed – the least possible. Parents, teachers, administrators, and the whole community should be up in arms. The consultant should have been fired.

Finally, I want to note some good I saw: First, that the most qualified person to be on this committee, the committee chair Jeff Grotsky, managed meetings well from a stand point of discerning the committee's central interest. However, in following that role, we never heard from him enough as an experienced leader in terms of guiding our potential.

Second, parents participated throughout. Having a talented and thoughtful parent on the committee (Francoise Sullivan) was a terrific help to ask the right questions and bring forward our previous community efforts – however, her voice was effectively silenced by the patriarchal quality of retirees who see themselves as the best authorities for good governance.

Grotsky and Sullivan had the wisdom and experience to shape a better plan and KCPS deserves leadership that can build and maintain facilities to grow our system into the opportunity of a real visionary 21st century asset.

In closing, this county needs to work on public participation and community engagement. This whole effort should be shelved until the county BOE, CC and administration can commit to a renewed effort that is serious about community engagement, innovation, and answering the 21st century call for a quality education for our citizens and the serious care of the whole child and a whole life for ALL our citizens.”

2. Jodi Bortz also read a statement from Robbi Behr – I have unfortunately not been able to attend a single meeting for this committee through no fault of yours, there have been plenty of meetings, I have just not been able to make any of them. I have been following along through the various meeting write ups and submitted my online survey. I was initially excited about putting into place a long term vision for our schools, that would give us something to aim for. While some of the early pie in the sky ideas were exactly that I was hopeful that setting our sights high would mean that we would compromise down to something that was achievable while also allowing us something visionary to strive for. I'm incredibly disappointed that our vision has been boiled down to fixing some roofs and putting in some windows, items which as far as I'm concerned should be the bottom of the projects that should have already been taken care of in the past twenty years with routine maintenance but which instead have been neglected because of penny pinching. If KCPS is going to get anyone in the community to buy into our success, we have to give everyone something to get excited about. We have to show them where we could be with the help of their investment. If we could say in fifteen years we'll have a state of the art x, y, or z that would be the envy of schools all over the shore that we could start down that path of building something special. People like to be part of something special. Unfortunately, it seems because of a few naysayers on this committee we stumbled down the path of what can we afford, which we all know is nothing. This is not the question this committee should have been asking. Investments of hard work and resources flows toward big ideas. In trying to create a rallying cry behind frankly a bare minimum level of building maintenance is an unfortunate waste of everyone's time and efforts. I would like to thank you for the time you have put into this project, particularly those of you who signed up because you

wanted more for us. I'm sorry this committee has suffered the fate of many efforts of Kent County, the idea that we somehow don't deserve anything more than the bare minimum.

3. Jodi Bortz – I'm a parent, business owner, and a product of Kent County Public Schools. I currently have two children enrolled. I'm also disappointed in the committee recommendations so far. The first meeting included special facilities upgrades, technology and yet here we are again arguing about whether children should spend entire days without seeing sunlight. Arguing about whether or not it's worth making an investment in our schools and our future because does Kent County even have a future. I'm tired of hearing about how school enrollment is declining. I'm tired of hearing how Kent County population is declining. I'm tired of hearing that the children are too small of the population to invest in. I'm tired of hearing we need to accept Kent County becoming a retirement community. I know lots of retired people. They don't believe that or want that. They're tired of being blamed. All of these problems can be fixed. Don't you see that fixing the school infrastructure is one piece towards fixing the overall decline that we've been seeing, not just in our school population, but in our community as well. It's called investment. It's clear from the meeting minutes that you all did not have the same end in mind and some of you are really only focused on ensuring no money gets invested except the bare minimum. I've been hearing about HVAC and other necessary repairs for a few years now. They're considerably more expensive now than when I was first hearing about them and other big repairs are looming in the future. Kent County is shrinking but it doesn't have to be. It's such a great place to grow up and live and I know lots of people that would live here if things were different. If we don't invest in ourselves, our children and our future, it seems clear there are folks on the western shore that will be happy to build a bridge to Tolchester and invest over here. I don't think any of us would like that outcome, but here we are paving their way by refusing to do for ourselves. I'm tired of leadership shirking ownership in the current state of things saying no to any vision in Kent County that includes better education. Good enough isn't good enough. Our kids deserve schools without leaky roofs with modern technology and access for all with spaces conducive to learning. That was your charge and what was presented here tonight does not even come close

4. Tom Mason – My children grew up here in Kent County schools. I have grandchildren who will be coming to the schools. First, I would like to thank the committee for the work they've done. I know they've put a lot of time and effort into it. Even though some of us may not agree with outcome I think there are a couple of things missing entirely. I don't see why we're moving the board of education office to Worton when we just spent a pile of money a few years ago. Seems like sometimes we do things and then later for whatever reason we want to change it. I imagine that's because they're tired of driving to Rock Hall. I don't know. Why aren't we talking about building a state of the art elementary school for Kent County. When Kent County High School was built years ago I always thought the plan was this was going to be our county center where the schools would be. We have our community center and parks here. It was mentioned how much we were going to save to keep Worton because we might need it someday. Instead of spending money on these old buildings, there comes a point where you're just throwing money down a rat hole. Let's create something we can all be proud of.

I know there would be a fight from the community that doesn't want to give up their school, but why not give up all of them and have one state of the art school. When the high school was built I'm sure Chestertown, Rock Hall and Galena people were upset because they now don't have a school in their community. I did not hear that mentioned at all tonight. I don't know if the committee ever discussed it. There's ways to fund this. We do not want to be thinking about raising property taxes. This county cannot afford a raise in property taxes. There's other ways to fund schools. I really think we need to slow down and back up a little bit. Is it really necessary to spend \$300,000 to move the central office? It's a lot of money. Let's back up and just think about this a little more.

5. Jim Baxter – I moved here about eight years ago from New Jersey. We had the same situations in our schools with a population of over 300,000. I can sympathize with what you're going through. I built schools as a contractor and I look at what you have here. The high school is beautiful and I look at that Worton school. You want to move a board of education office into it. That school would support building up and building out to support this area for schools. Is there any comment from the committee right now of using that building for a school instead of central office.

Dr. Couch - We were thinking long term and how we might support continued loss of enrollment. The committee's thought it would not be a good idea to surplus the Worton Elementary building as it could potentially be used to support a new elementary school or moving middle school students to that campus. Moving the Board of Education into that building would keep the building occupied because empty buildings tend to deteriorate quickly. Moving into that building would ensure that the building and land it kept for the school system, essentially buying more time until we have more information regarding economic development. We can think about a more permanent place for the Board of Education once we have more information. We currently have part of Central Office housed at the high school and buses are temporarily housed at the Public Works county building until we have a permanent location. Moving central office to one centralized location would provide better efficiency and bringing everyone together. Bus drivers and buses are making trips to Rock Hall and we are responsible for paying for the fuel to come to meetings, etc. If we house everyone in the same location, there could be additional savings within the budget. If we surplus the central office building in Rock Hall that's one less building to worry about and it's unlikely we will need another school building in Rock Hall. Everyone on the committee agreed it would be a mistake to surplus the Worton elementary building, so we are left with deciding if it should be occupied. The biggest problem with one centralized elementary school is we currently have some students that are on the bus for up to 90 minutes. We also have to consider that we could potentially be bussing some of our youngest children for two hours or more.

Mr. Baxter – geographically is Worton school centrally located in the county?

Dr. Couch – It's obviously more centralized than obviously Rock Hall, Millington, or Galena. I believe Garnet Elementary School has the shortest bus routes for all of our students. It's really our outlying schools such as Rock Hall or Galena students that would have a much longer bus ride with one central elementary school in Worton.

Francoise Sullivan – We have friends with students in Betterton and Worton who go to Galena Elementary School and are currently on the bus for over an hour.

Joe Wheeler – The middle school run may be an hour and half or an hour and 45 minutes to outer areas like Golts.

Dr. Lever –Galena Elementary School is currently operating at 81% utilization and is projected to go up to 84% or 85% on paper. During the day to day operation of the school, all spaces are being completely used. The route 301 improvements might bring new housing to that area and more population and those students will likely attend Galena. The introduction of fiber across the county may also bring increased populations to certain areas. Galena could probably not handle an additional fifty kids, but we're very uncertain right now. We don't really know what's going to happen. This plan will provide a bit of time to see what is going to happen in the county. In two to three years we will be in a better position to determine what direction enrollments are going

6. David Foster – I'm an engineer and planner. I recognize the tremendous amount of work that's gone into this and I really appreciate that. When you put up the demographic information particularly in 2040, it gave the perspective this was going to be retirees' vs young families. I'm speaking for myself although I am also on the Town Council in Chestertown where I ran for election in the most mature section of Chestertown. The single most frequent question I received was what about the schools. The Town Council has no authority over the schools, but I want you to know that the older population is very interested in the schools and attracting young families, including concerns about where their grandchildren will attend school. I think the entire county is interested in your schools and in anything we can do to help them.

7. Dr. Wendy Costa – I wondered how much it will really cost to renovate the Worton building to move central office there. It seems to me that \$300,000 is a huge amount. Realistically, could we do it for considerably less money.

Dr. Couch –The Board of Education is responsible for setting the budget. We know for sure we have to build a permanent bus depot. We've already been in the Worton Elementary and determined we only need to occupy one wing of the building. We could possibly lease the other side of the building and generate some revenue. We determined we could do the minimum work necessary to function as a central office and will not build permanent walls, etc. I think everyone believes it doesn't make sense to have central office in a non-central location. We hope putting central office in a more central location will also generate more public input and parent engagement.

8. Piers Heriz-Smith - It seems you've put in a lot of work and I appreciate that. My concern is more philosophical. In the three years I've been following this it appears county executives seem to have built a fire wall around the school system and its shortcomings. It doesn't seem the county commissioner relationships with those trying to solve this problem are collaborative. I don't believe it's a problem that should just be on your shoulders. I wondered if there's anything you could say that the future might be better in that regard. It seems the County has put the school on a starvation diet which doesn't bode well.

9. Kerri Hocking – My daughter is in 5th grade at Galena Elementary School. Hearing there are leaks in the school are concerning. I know you have plans and everyone has their own ideas, but I hope you listen to what parents have to say. I don't know if you've thought about a trailer for your offices. The high school has a couple of trailers and they're pretty reasonably priced. They usually have a bathroom and a nice place to sit. I don't know if you've thought about using Worton elementary for middle school students. I hope decisions are made with the future in mind because costs are going to rise. I'm really concerned for my kids. My family is considering pulling out just because we're not sure they're the number one thought in this county, including the school and their future.

10. Bill Lobley – I live in the Worton area and have two boys who are attending Galena Elementary School. It seems \$300,000 would be much better spent to fund programs at the high school where we have very unique programs for our students. I work at the sports concession stand and that facility is slowly falling apart. You talk about a bus depot for housing the new buses and \$300,000 could renovate the facility at the high school that already has pre-existing fencing. I think \$300,000 could be better spent on the educational facilities.

Dr. Lever – Putting aside the cost of \$300,000, do you think it's a good idea to move the Central Office to Worton?

Mr. Lobley – Sure, but why can't central office be moved to a facility already maintained?

Dr. Lever – Part of the problem is there's a cost to keeping the facility even if it's not occupied.

Francoise Sullivan – We did talk about what it would take to move the central offices into the high school and there's still an associated cost. You need to keep the populations separate from students. We would need a separate entrance into the building so people aren't just coming through the high school to get to Central Office. There are safety concerns.

Mr. Lobley – Safety is a concern. This facility, Galena Elementary and most of the schools have no way to shut down a person that could be a potential problem. The high school is an open target. I think security should be one of the bigger priorities for our schools.

11. Tom Mason - Looking around the room I'm a little concerned about our African American population. I know you can't make people come to a meeting. Notoriously, Kent County does not get people out to attend meetings. I would rather have my grandchildren spending fifteen

more minutes on the bus if they're going to be transported to a state of the art facility to receive a better education. I don't think we want to cloud our thoughts with how long a child has to ride the bus. Some are always going to be on the bus a long time, depending on where you live.

Francoise Sullivan – We discussed new construction and while it didn't make it into the preliminary plan, it's something we discussed. Even if the final plan was to build a state of the art building, we can't ignore the renovations that need to take place now.

Dr. Couch – We also provided opportunities for parents and community members to fill out online comments. We have over 150 of those comments and have analyzed and discussed them. Everybody agreed they wanted central office to be more centrally located and for us to surplus as many buildings as soon as we can to save money.

12. Holly Matheson – I run a Montessori school in Worton. In 2008, we had a substantial dip in enrollment. We are full this year, with many new families that came to Kent County for the first time since 2007.

13. A community member stated he did not see many people in attendance and wondered if the scheduled time for the meeting might be a concern.

Francoise Sullivan – We have tried to get people to come to any meeting. I personally emailed people I know and clients I have, asking them to please come tonight.

14. Tim O'Brien – I have two kids, one in elementary and one in high school. Thank you for all your good work. It's been an issue with us since we moved here seven years ago. Most of the kids are doing well here, but that does not deny the fact that in many respects, your hands are tied. If people do not feel the county commissioners make the children of this county a priority, it's lost in the community. The county commissioners seem to have a fire wall of denial or lack of interest or not thinking anything is wrong because they're completely oblivious of what the children have to deal with here. I can name six or seven families that want to live in Chestertown that should be part of this community but they live on the Queen Anne's side. There needs to be some sort of vision here. There is an assumption that we're going to keep sinking until someone comes here and says there's a reason to invest long term. That's not your responsibility, but rather a larger issue on the county level. I see many other areas that are getting funding outside the county system that are applying for state and federal grants. Is Kent County going as aggressively as it can to obtain funding from other resources?