

Support Our Students and Teachers: Vote “NO” on Gatehouse II

December 30, 2008: Fairfax County faces a budget cuts of as much as \$650 million. Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is facing budgetary challenges as well, as it consumes over half of the county’s budget. FCPS is already considering cost-saving measures such as increasing the average class size for the second year in a row. Given these circumstances, it is mind-boggling that the Fairfax County School Board is continuing to push for the purchase of a second headquarters building for administrative staff. Fortunately, this plan has already been unanimously rejected once by the county Board of Supervisors. But the School Board will be back, using back-room negotiations and closed-door meetings, to once again ask for a lavish headquarters building for administrators, while thousands of students and teachers sit in schools that can’t get renovated and thousands more fill trailers because of overcrowding.

We are all aware of the declining real-estate market - it is the main reason behind the county’s budget crisis. Yet the School Board initially proposed to buy the so-called Gatehouse II building for \$52 million, which is \$8.5 million more than the building sold for just two years ago. On its “do-over,” the School Board now says it will pay no more than \$50 million. Throw in another \$49.5 million to renovate the building (for a floor-to-ceiling granite lobby, a state-of-the-art fitness center, and an on-site cafeteria with outdoor seating), and the total up-front costs will be at least \$100 million.

The School Board claims the costs of Gatehouse II will be funded from cost savings generated by staff consolidation. This is the same rationale the School Board claimed when it acquired the existing headquarters - Gatehouse I. So let’s review what happened.

The School Board originally claimed savings of \$20.9 million over 33 years on Gatehouse I, but in March 2008 had to report to the Board of Supervisors that it had achieved less than half of its original goal. At best, this result is underwhelming. There are also reasons, however, to question these results. In response to Freedom of Information Act requests by FairfaxCAPS, FCPS has been unable to document or substantiate its claims of \$8.5 million in travel savings, which constitutes 83 percent of the total savings claimed. FCPS has been similarly unable or unwilling to substantiate its claims of staff reductions due to consolidation in Gatehouse I. Without being able to substantiate these savings, it is unclear how FCPS can claim any cost savings. In fact, it is likely that Gatehouse I is actually a net cost to county taxpayers.

FCPS’s own projections show that in the first ten years there will be no savings for Gatehouse II. In fact, over the next decade, the school system projects a net deficit of nearly \$5.2 million for

Gatehouse II. Setting aside the next three years when FCPS will not have debt obligations to pay, the first year the School Board projects the administrative building to actually save the taxpayers money is when today's first-graders will be graduating—in 2020! In the current budget environment we should not be taking on a decade of debt that will further burden the operating budget. All spending cuts should be directed at headquarters, sparing our classrooms and teachers to the greatest extent possible.

If the School Board must request approval for capital improvements to build and renovate schools, it should not be allowed to cut back-room deals to avoid placing capital improvement projects for administrative facilities before the voters. And if the Board of Supervisors believes that the county can afford to provide \$100 million-plus in bond authority to the School Board, then its proceeds should be used for school capacity and renovation projects.

To the Board of Supervisors, we say: support our kids, support our teachers, support our schools – vote “NO” on Gatehouse II.

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