

FAC CIP MAY 15th WORK SESSION STATEMENT

Throughout this school year the FAC has been involved in a discussion around the impacts of our growing enrollment on our school facilities. We spent months writing the “Future Facilities Needs Report” which discussed how to address the growing needs of our school system in a way that incorporates a long-range vision and an understanding of how each capacity generating solution impacts both the entire school system and the Arlington County community, while at the same time acknowledging that our budget and available space are limited.

As an advisory committee to the School Board, we advocate for a perspective that takes in to consideration the needs of the entire school system and puts each decision into the context of how it impacts our seat needs as a whole, at every school level, and how it fits within our overall budget and bonding capacity. We understand the pressures of our growing enrollment and we aim to advise you to think long term and to make the most efficient use of every dollar and every site. The FAC advocates for looking at the seat need for all levels in the CIP and recommends that the plans describe solutions, including potentially creative solutions, that yield additional seats on time and on budget.

We urge that every decision is made transparently in the context of understanding impacts to our overall seat need and how it fits in to the overall budget. It is important to "show your work" and to show the community what our constraints are and allow everyone to make a decision that explicitly recognizes the trade offs and the impacts to all of Arlington.

APS has the challenge in this CIP of creating capacity in the short term while also planning for long term growth. Every decision we make on capital projects and buildings today must examine both the short term needs and the long term implications. Arlington County’s available space is limited and must serve our growing population’s needs for schools and multiple other uses. We must therefore ensure that we are maximizing the use of our sites and not limiting our ability to grow programs and schools in the future. We think this principle applies to both relatively small scale projects such as the turf field replacements and conversions and to larger scale new capital projects and our existing schools; any financial investment at any given site should be made with an understanding that it allows for future capacity expansion if needed.

In seeking solutions to the growth-driven needs throughout this year we have recognized:

1. APS and the Arlington community derive great value from our high-quality school system. In planning for growth, we should recognize that the education APS offers is an enormous asset to Arlington County and the goal of any plan should be to maintain our high educational standards which contribute to the high quality of life in Arlington
2. Arlington County, and by extension APS, has limited available building sites, a limited budget, and limited bonding capacity.
3. Construction costs, nationally and regionally, have recently increased at a higher rate than in the past, while at the same time County revenue growth has slowed from what had been projected. Thus, there is a double impact of increased cost and reduced resources.
4. By law, APS must accommodate all residents of school age in our K-12 system. As APS grows it is important to have a plan to increase capacity to accommodate all APS students.

5. It is important to develop a strategic, collaborative effort between the School Board and the County Board to develop a comprehensive and strategic long- range plan for land use and capital projects across the county.

At our FAC meeting last night we looked at the three APS CIP scenarios – the Superintendent’s recommended option, Option A and Option B. Last night was the first time we had seen Option A and Option B and our discussion was broad and not specific. Our discussion was framed around the following considerations:

- How each scenario worked within the APS and County budget (capital budget, and to some degree, operating budget).
- How each addressed seat needs at each level along with the timing of when those seats are needed.
- How interim solutions, such as relocatables, should be considered as part of these scenarios.
- How each one fit into a long-range plan.
Potentially innovative non-capital solutions, like looking system wide at attendance zones or programmatic or operational changes.

BUDGET

We see the CIP is a financial and planning document that seeks to assess the impact of projected student growth on APS facilities and plan capital solutions. The timing of these capital projects is determined by financial constraints, seat deficits and what the School Board priorities are for bringing new seats on line. It sets the parameters for what capital projects we can afford within our bonding capacity and timelines for those projects over the 10-year CIP timeline. With any fiscal constraints there will be trade-offs and hard decisions to be made balancing seat capacity needs for APS and other Arlington County priorities.

We looked broadly at each CIP scenario “spreadsheet”. We discussed how in order to allow for funding for one project it might mean that the timing for another project may be pushed out to a later year. We recognize that spending more on one project will mean that less will be available to spend on other seat needs in this CIP.

We note also that servicing bond issuances for new schools directly results in increased operating budget expenses through the obligations to debt service. Funding spent on paying for debt obligations is less funding available each year for ongoing operations that are critical to our schools – teachers and staff, educational materials, etc.

One FAC member suggested addressing APS facilities needs by considering creative financing solutions beyond the debt service to spending ratio (while maintaining the County’s current bond

rating) especially if APS and the County are using bond proceeds to truly invest in the future of the County and its citizens. We believe this is worthy of additional consideration.

SEAT DEFICITS/TIMING

We started our discussion by looking at the seat deficits at the ES, MS and HS level that this plan seeks to accommodate.

In the next ten years this CIP needs to plan to address the following seat deficits by 2027-28:

ES: -2,149

MS: -559

HS: -1,544

We evaluated how each scenario works to address (or not address) these seat needs. We noted:

The Superintendent's Recommended CIP at the ES level plans for 725 new seats at Reed in 2021 and 725 new seats at a location TBD in 2029. At the MS level it plans for a 300 seat addition at a location TBD in 2023. At the HS level it includes a plan for 600 seats at the Ed Center and 250 new seats for Arlington Tech in 2021 and 800 seats at the Career Center in 2026 .

Option A plans for at the ES level 725 new seats at Reed in 2021 and 725 new seats at a location TBD in 2031. At the MS level it plans for a 300 seat addition at a location TBD in 2023. At the HS level it includes a plan for 600 seats in 2021 at the Ed Center and 800 seats at the Career Center in 2024.

Option B plans for at the ES level 725 new seats at Reed in 2021 but, does not include a plan for any future new seats at the ES level. It also does not include a plan for any additional new middle school seats. At the HS level it creates 1300 new seats at the Career Center in 2024.

The FAC has consistently advocated for a CIP plan that address the seat needs at every level. We therefore broadly gravitated toward the scenarios that do have a plan to create additional new seats at every level and had concerns about the scenarios that did not. We understand the critical importance of identifying sites for future schools and that including a placeholder in the CIP which allows for new seats at a location TBD sets in motion the process of beginning to identify sites that we may need for new schools.

However, given the many needs for seats the FAC has reconsidered our position on Middle School seats and agree that the timing to create capacity at the MS level could be reconsidered.

When the FAC looked at the numbers for the CIP during two sub-committee meetings this spring the recommendation we made on when we thought MS seats might be needed it was based on the idea that we would need to look for a plan for seats or capacity solutions *if* all of the overcapacity was located in one or two schools. Data was shared last night that indicated that in 2022 all 6 of our neighborhood middle schools will be under 111% capacity in 2022 which is a manageable amount spread somewhat equally between schools. The FAC did not discuss an exact date or come to a new conclusion for when the timing of the MS seats could come online but, there was general agreement that it could be moved out to a later date.

Some concern was expressed that waiting until 2031 to create new ES and MS capacity would be too long, especially given the rate of growth of our elementary school population.

INTERIM SOLUTIONS

Relocatable classrooms are a part of any discussion on effectively handling enrollment growth and are an important and valuable tool for the school division to address temporary and localized instances of overcapacity. They have been used in the past, are currently being used (extensively at some sites) and will likely be part of future scenarios. They provide flexibility that may help yield more ideal long-term solutions.

However, there are tradeoffs to planning to accommodate large seat deficits with relocatable classrooms. Sole or even extreme reliance on the use of relocatable classrooms system-wide also puts enormous pressure on the common spaces in schools, including cafeterias, gymnasiums, libraries and even hallways. Relocatable classrooms placed on outdoor spaces such as parking lots and tennis courts not only impacts school use, but also restricts community access to those facilities. It would result in the loss of a large portion of green space for fields and play at each school, increased runoff and inefficient energy use resulting in higher operating costs. Finally, relocatable classrooms must continue to be properly evaluated in the context of security and safety. The tipping point for relocatable classroom use, which should be identified and planned for, is when instruction and the quality of education being delivered is at the risk of being compromised.

We think that it is important to consider that growth in Arlington has historically never occurred evenly distributed among our neighborhoods and schools. There is also a large disparity in the number of relocatables that can be accommodated at each of our schools. Some schools are shown to be able to manage large numbers of relocatables while others can't manage any or have small limits. Growth planned to only be managed in this way could lead to a large disparity in the size of schools at the comparable level. If boundary changes were made without adding new capacity the boundary changes would involve moving students to non-permanent seats.

We suggest that other alternative solutions be considered that allow seat deficits to be addressed without a significant capital investment such as implementing space utilization upgrades at schools where it has not already been done be implemented and program moves. These options should be used in tandem with relocatable classrooms.

LONG RANGE PLAN

We would also like to urge you to see how each project fits into a long term plan and to plan for next steps that would follow decisions made for this CIP. Look at all the sites to ensure that each site is used in an optimal way and that future capacity could be added, if necessary. It is also important to consider that as building costs are currently rising for planned projects they will likely rise further for future projects. We should look to mitigate this problem by examining ways to control costs and finding efficiencies in the community engagement and design processes to save time and money. Additional support from the County and coordination and integration of long-range planning will also be of great value, to APS and to the County.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

We recognize that some of the options being considered for this CIP create scenarios that would leave capacity at some schools with different sizes and amenities. We need to be sure that each scenario delivers opportunities for all APS students to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, music and similar activities. If all schools cannot be precisely the same (as is currently the the case) then we feel like it is important to look system wide for potentially creative solutions that would create more opportunities for all students. We think these solutions should be sought system wide and that no single community should be zoned to a school that does not have comparable facilities or opportunities for their children.

As the Facilities Advisory Council, we can address various facilities-related solutions. However, the Arlington community, along with the Department of Instruction and Learning, may consider non-capital, non-facilities operational and instructional options with careful consideration of what is acceptable within our expectations of high standards and perceptions of equity.

We have reached a point where our way of thinking about how to best handle enrollment growth has to change. We will have to build, but we will not be able to build our way out of this crisis. The overarching goal and desire to build great school environments for all our students must remain constant as we move forward. With planning and creativity we may be able to find innovative and forward-thinking solutions that will put us in a better position to face the future while maintaining the high quality of life we enjoy in Arlington.