

To: Montgomery County Council  
Re: FY26 Capital Budget, Amendments to FY25-30 CIP  
Date: February 6, 2025

Dear Councilmembers,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide community input regarding the amendments to the FY25-30 MCPS Capital Improvements Program ("CIP"). I live in Bethesda and have a first-grader at Ashburton Elementary School, as well as 5 year old and 2 year old future MCPS students. I am writing to ask that you address the overcrowding of our school. While it may not meet MCPS' criteria for seriously overcapacity, it still has a seat deficit that will continue to grow. Current enrollment is 878 and it will again have a student population over 900 next year. As the school and teachers do their best to absorb the growing population, the student population exceeds the State's recommendation for an elementary school population by 100 this year. The enrollment also affects the class sizes, which may fall within the guidelines dictated by MCPS, but each class, on average has 3 more students than neighboring elementary schools. But beyond class sizes, here is how the size of the student population affects the day-to-day for students and teachers:

- My daughter eats lunch at 10:50 in the morning to accommodate 6 lunch shifts in the cafeteria. Because they eat so early, the class also has a snack time (taking time away from instructional time) in the afternoon when students can eat a snack from home. Of course, I am glad that my daughter doesn't end up hungry and distracted for her afternoon, but I am then left thinking of the 28% of students at Ashburton who qualify for FARMs. What are the equity implications for these students?
- Because the first grade has recess after lunch, students need to move from the cafeteria to the playground. They line up by class and are then dismissed line by line once they quiet and orderly. Which is to say that 5 classes of roughly 27 students need to be quiet and orderly in order to go to the playground. I don't need to tell you that 130 6- and 7-year-olds are not easily quieted to move from the cafeteria out, further taking away from important time spent at lunch and at recess.
- Ashburton's capacity has been technically increased through the addition of so-called "semi-permanent" modulars (and most recently by the decision to increase class sizes), yet there is no sign that they are not permanent. While these seats have been added, the hallways have not been widened and the cafeteria has not been expanded. A recent PTA Bingo night was held in two shifts to accommodate the number of attendees. How wonderful to have such an involved community that so many people would like to participate, but how sad that our community cannot actually all be together in the same space!

According to MCPS data, Ashburton is ranked #1 for utilization in the county out of 138 elementary schools. This is particularly jarring when compared with some of our neighboring elementary schools - for example, the new development Amalyn opened in the last few years

and is still being completed. It is in the Ashburton district but just past the new development, Burning Tree Elementary is ranked 127/138 and Seven Locks is ranked 110/138. This is not to say that we are an island of overcrowding surrounded by less utilized schools - we also have neighboring schools facing critical concerns - but there is an imbalance that needs to be addressed.

When I first moved to Bethesda from D.C. in 2019, I was heartened to see that the county was in the process of planning for a new elementary school in the WJ cluster to alleviate current and future capacity issues. During and after the pandemic, this has been shelved, and we are left with what other options? The problem has only gotten worse.

Since that time, development in the Ashburton district has continued, our population has risen, and the new developments are not even completed and fully occupied. The Ashburton service area also includes areas that are zoned for much higher density housing than some of our neighbors - indeed there are neighboring districts with no multifamily dwellings. New initiatives are constantly being proposed that would increase housing density in the Ashburton district (Attainable Housing Strategies Initiative, More Housing N.O.W.), and we know the developers will not be waiting for a schools plan before jumping on those opportunities.

I confess that I do not have the solutions to these problems. Be it a boundary study to redistribute the students to other sites, building a new school or repurposing existing MCPS buildings like the Grosvenor school site, or providing Change of School Assignments ("COSA") for students to neighboring, under-capacity schools. The choices made will determine the quality of education and experiences of MCPS students, families, and the community.

We live in a wonderful community and have dedicated educators serving our children. I hope that the council will work with MCPS to address the growing size of Ashburton to ensure the success of future cohorts of MCPS students.

Thank you for your time,

Anne Donovan  
Ashburton Elementary School Parent