

## **Middle School Rally Draws a Crowd - It Won't Happen Unless We Make it Happen!**

*By Irma A. Clifton*

Supporters of a South County Middle School held a rally and everybody came. On a rainy weeknight, Wednesday, October 24, the auditorium of the South County Secondary School held hundreds of parents, students and those interested in having a middle school in South County sooner rather than later. They wanted to let officials and candidates for office know just how determined they were. Tables at the entrance of the auditorium had people lined up two to three deep at times waiting to sign a petition supporting a middle school now.

The rally was the result of months of planning and strategy sessions by the South County Middle School Solutions Group, made up of residents from communities in Lorton, Mason Neck, Fairfax Station and the Newington Forest area who are concerned that a middle school is not in the county plan to be built until 2017. According to the group's Web site, their aim is to bring together the appropriate parties to forge a partnership to build South County Middle School by 2012 through innovative means benefiting students, local residents, the county and the business community. They believe that with the significant growth now being experienced, as well as that being projected, and with the unknown of BRAC in the equation, construction of a middle school is justified now.

First among the speakers were members of the South County Middle School Solutions Group who gave convincing presentations accompanied by graphs, facts, figures and maps supporting the need for a new middle school by 2012. Heads nodded and applause greeted each conclusion that South County simply could not wait until 2017 for a school.

Politicians turned out in numbers in support of the middle school. When Mount Vernon Supervisor Gerry Hyland approached the podium, the crowd roared as he stripped off his coat, tie and shirt to display a green and white South County Middle School T-shirt. He thanked Rep. Tom Davis for having the foresight to include land for schools in the original prison-closing package. Hyland said he believes 100 percent in the need for a middle school, saying we need it today. He and others have been working on a list of possible sites that could be sold to help leverage the cost of the school. Some properties have been identified, he said, and he will be seeking support of the South County Federation and homeowners' associations in those communities near the sites.

Rep. Tom Davis voiced his support for the middle school and said he is working to bring it about within the 2012 timeframe. He mentioned the cooperation between parties that resulted in the South County Secondary School and saw the potential for that to happen again.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerry Connolly, wearing a South County Middle School T-shirt, said that although he fully supports a middle school in South County, we don't want other schools to sacrifice, so we (meaning South County) can have what we want. He expressed confidence that a way could be found to have the school and not jeopardize renovations and construction at other schools.

Fairfax County School Board Chairman Dan Storck went through a list of reasons the middle school is needed now and said he is working closely with other officials and school staff to find a way to make it happen. He stated that he is a firm believer in community schools.

South County Secondary School student body leaders gave a graphic presentation on some of the difficulties that are already affecting their school as a result of its current overcrowding, saying it will only get worse.

George Barker, Democratic candidate for state Senate in the 37th District, said he was there to lend his support and that we need a middle school as expeditiously as possible. He said, "I'm willing to do whatever I can. I'll work with federal, state and county officials to do whatever it takes [to get a middle school]."

State Del. Dave Albo said people need to make their voice heard in November by voting for school board members who support the building of a middle school in South County now.

Lorton Station resident Greg Shuckman says he considers South County to be south of the Fairfax County Parkway and, "Let's be sure, as we plan for a middle school, that it be the right size to accommodate all of the children that reside in that area. Otherwise it would be egregious."

Fairfax Station resident and Planning Commission member Tim Sargeant related that when the former Lorton prison was undergoing the comprehensive planning process that the plan included a high school and a middle school. It was a recognized community need then, and that need hasn't changed. In fact, it has escalated. He supports the need to have separate middle and high schools.

Using a play on late-night television host David Letterman's ten reasons, South County Secondary School Principal Dale Rumberger presented a list that worked its way down to reason number one: "It's the right thing to do." Supporters in the audience could not have agreed more.