

New School? It's Up to the Community
 Commentary
 By Christine Morin and Kim Kern
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We are often asked, "When is the South County Middle School going to open? Isn't it opening in 2009, 2011, 2012?" The current answer to that question is possibly 2017 or maybe never.



This is the reality that South County students and families are facing. South County Middle School is currently on the Fairfax County Public School (FCPS) Capital Improvement Plan for 2017; this means that the school is currently unfunded, and quite possibly may never be built due to projected available seats in other area schools outside of our community. According to FCPS, the burden is on our community to



formulate a plan and to find the money to build this public middle school. According to FCPS stipulations made during the boundary study of 2007, if our community is unsuccessful in this endeavor, then we will have another boundary study in 2008. The results of that study may place 450 – 500 of our students at Lake Braddock and Hayfield indefinitely, thereby sending South County students to middle and high schools far outside of their community and severely overcrowding those other schools.

Consistent with FCPS' policy decision to move away from building "mega" secondary schools, South County Secondary School (SCSS) was initially designed as a high school with a capacity of 2,500 students. It was modified to accommodate middle school children for the 2005 opening, with the "promise" that a middle school would be built and accelerated when SCSS became overcrowded. Due to flawed FCPS projections regarding student populations, this came much faster than expected. SCSS was in fact overcrowded during its very first year of operation and yet there is still no plan for a middle school to respond to capacity needs for this area. It is important to keep in mind that the 2007 boundary adjustment we just went through did not fix the overcrowding, it was simply designed to provide interim, minimal relief until either our community finds a funding solution or another boundary study is conducted in 2008.

The South County area's middle and high school students have been through an unprecedented two school boundary studies in two years, 2005 for the initial SCSS boundary and again in 2007 for the SCSS boundary to alleviate overcrowding, in addition to the elementary boundary studies for Lorton Station in 2003 and one slated for the new elementary school in Laurel Hill in 2008.

South County Middle School must be built consistent with the original plan of building a middle school for the residents of the South County area and to complete the South County pyramid while maintaining our sense of community!

Shifting our students to Lake Braddock and Hayfield is not the answer. It would relegate South County Secondary long term to a secondary school that it was never intended or built to be, unfairly remove South County kids from their neighborhood school and make our children the ones who ultimately pay the price for the faulty projections that have plagued FCPS' boundary and renovation decisions. The solution that is the best programmatic solution for our children, holds our community leaders to their word, and follows the School Board's Strategic Governance initiatives and the recent Sleep Study is to take the time to develop a plan to build a middle school now.

To work toward a better solution on behalf of South County students and residents, a group of South County residents has been meeting for three years and have formed the South County Middle School Solutions Group. The purpose of the group is to:

1. Secure a South County Middle School benefiting South County students, local residents, the county and the business community through innovative means by 2012.
2. Alleviate SCSS overcrowding by building a South County Middle School by 2012.
3. Build partnerships among appropriate parties to facilitate the identification of a solution and necessary funding sources to build the South County Middle School by 2012.

4. Continue to educate the community about the need and status of the South County Middle School.
5. Work to complete the South County Pyramid and keep South County children attending South County schools.

Our group is working with community leaders, politicians and School Board members to develop a plan and secure funding for the South County Middle School. While several of our local leaders have expressed their commitment to helping us find an answer, the reality is that our time is running short; if we do not secure a funding solution during this school year, our kids will face another boundary study. We need your help!

What can you do to help?

1. Attend the Oct. 24 South County Middle School Rally at 7:30 p.m., at South County Secondary.
2. Visit our Web site at www.southcountymiddleschool.org and get involved.
3. Contact U.S. Reps. Tom Davis (R-11) and Jim Moran (D-8), Supervisors Gerry Hyland (D-Mount Vernon) and Elaine McConnell (R-Springfield) and Chairman Gerry Connolly (D-At-large) and ask them to help accelerate the building of a middle school.
4. Contact School Board members Dan Storck (Mount Vernon), Brad Center (Lee), Cathy Belter (Springfield) and all at-large members to ask them to help accelerate the building of a middle school.
5. Tell seven friends about the middle school issue and get them involved.
6. Contact candidates running for the School Board and Board of Supervisors in the November elections.

Christine Morin and Kim Kern are the co-chairs of the South County Middle School Solutions Group. Visit their Web site at www.southcountymiddleschool.org