

"Two Down, One To Go"

Parents, community leaders rejoice at groundbreaking for new elementary school in Laurel Hill.

By Amber Healy

February 27, 2008

The politicians had to talk over the dull roar of children laughing, munching on cookies, cupcakes and brownies and playing, but that was all right. Saturday morning was all about those children, the future students at the new elementary school to be built in the Laurel Hill community.

"Most of you have a sense of the history in this area, beginning with the prison and the vacant ground that used to surround it," said Dan Storck, chairman of the Fairfax County School Board. "People worked very hard to change this area from the armpit of the county to the wonderful place it has become."

The new elementary school, slated to open for the 2009-10 school year, will fulfil another promise made to the early home buyers in Lorton, who moved in to Laurel Hill before South County Secondary School, located just across Silverbrook Road, was built.

Many of the leaders who spoke Saturday morning praised the community for its hard work and dedication to the elementary school and the transformation the area has undergone in the past few years, then shifted their focus to the as-yet unfulfilled promise of a middle school.

U.S. Rep. Tom Davis (R-11), who was a freshman Congressman when he submitted legislation to close the prison in the early 1990s, applauded the community.

"This is what happens when you get good leaders who put aside partisanship to get things done, and when the community rallies around a project," he said. "Had anyone not stepped up, at the county level or at the community level, this would not have happened." Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chairman Gerry Connolly (D-At large), in turn, thanked Davis for his work to close the prison. "We owe Tom a tremendous debt of gratitude for what has happened here," Connolly said. "This has been a miraculous transformation. The energy for this area is just unbelievable."

LOOKING TO the future, however, Connolly said he hopes the start of construction on the elementary school is "presaging for our next goal, building a South County Middle School."

Supervisor Gerry Hyland (D-Mount Vernon) turned the spotlight to the School Board, crediting Storck and new member Liz Bradsher (Springfield) for their hard work.

Bradsher may be new to the School Board, but her work as a community activist is credited with helping to secure funding for South County Secondary.

"They have worked in partnership to make this happen and will continue to work together to make the middle school happen," Hyland said. "None of this would have happened if it were not for people in the community who had a vision and reached out to government to make it happen."



Photo by Amber Healy/The Connection
Outgoing U.S. Rep. Tom Davis (R-11) talks with Laurel Hill resident and education activist Christine Morin on Saturday, Feb. 23 before a groundbreaking ceremony for the new elementary school in that community.



Photo by Amber Healy/The Connection
A handful of elected officials picked up their commemorative gold shovels behind a crowd of children during a groundbreaking ceremony near the future elementary school in Laurel Hill.

Fairfax County Public School Superintendent Dr. Jack Dale accepted a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol from Davis, then presented it to Betsy Fenske, Cluster V administrator, who will help to select the staff at the new school starting in early 2009.

"Now that we're here and starting construction, we can start to talk about budget," Dale said, earning a grimace from Connolly. "Eighteen months from now, we'll have a grand opening and hopefully, all of you future students will be here to help us cut the ribbon."

When the new as-yet unnamed school opens, it will provide relief to overcrowded Lorton Station and Silverbrook elementary schools. Silverbrook is currently the most overcrowded school in the county, Storck said. The new school will draw students who currently attend Lorton Station, Silverbrook, Halley and Gunston elementary schools.

"I think this is a great day for the community, especially the Silverbrook community," Bradsher said.

"Maybe for the first time, Silverbrook won't be bursting at the seams."

