

MAKING SCHOOL YARDS TRAILER PARKS

By William Nicoson

Education of children is the greatest obligation owed by the present to the future in any civilized society. Of course education of high quality requires the commitment of comparably high resources.

Fairfax County's residents are blessed with high resources. The County ranks among the top 20 of the nation's 3,110 counties in terms of per capita income. In 1997, the most recent year for which Department of Commerce rankings are available, Fairfax was 18th in the nation. My guess is that after 3 years of stunning growth, it has now caught up with Arlington (11th) and maybe Alexandria (7th).

But stunning growth has also brought enormous pressure on the Fairfax County School District to expand its facilities. As a result, the County is now educating children in trailers, some 700 trailers to be exact. Virtually no community within the county has escaped the trailer epidemic. Elementary classroom deficits (above 4 for any school) are predicted in the next school year at 23 in Reston and 42 in Herndon, yielding a likely trailer count in the area of at least 65. These trailers lack bathrooms, are as offensive to the eye as any trailer park and, on rainy days, pose a challenge to student comfort and health.

Schools, like most other County facilities, are financed by bonds approved by voters in referenda. It has long been a principle of debt management by the County that its debt service in any year must not exceed 10% of its budget. During most of the 1990s, funds for school construction and renovation were further limited to 50% of total bond proceeds in any year, or about \$75 million of the \$150 million raised annually. In the last 3 years, however, annual capital spending on schools increased to \$100 million (1997-98) and \$130 million (1999) including state assistance.

The County has a 5-year Capital Improvement Plan of \$750 million which appears hopelessly inadequate to reduce reliance on trailers based on the School Board's estimate that 500 new classrooms will be needed over 5 years at a cost of \$722 million. Nevertheless the School Board has set a target this year to reduce by "at least 15% the portion of students...receiving instruction in trailers."

Tom Brady, Assistant Superintendent of the School District, says the School Board will study alternatives to conventional construction, such as all-year schooling, modular units and grade reconfiguration which moves grades from overcrowded schools to schools with available space (e.g., moving crowded sixth grade classes to Langston Hughes Middle School and eighth graders from Langston Hughes to South Lakes High School). Space reconfiguration is also possible: the Lake Anne Library has become three classrooms, and administrators have been moved into trailers in order to convert offices to classrooms. All this is laudable, but most of the 700 trailers will survive.

The County Board of Supervisors should rethink its inadequate Capital Improvement Plan and, if necessary, adopt a special tax increment to replace the trailers. That would require political courage, of course, which was not much in evidence at its last meeting when it approved a budget cutting \$31 million from the School Board's request for operating funds. But as the school population continues to grow, turning school yards into trailer parks, the political risks may shift.

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