



## Special Edition: School Board Votes to Close Clifton ES

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### School Board Votes to Close Clifton ES

In another demonstration of being out of touch with reality and common sense, the School Board voted last Thursday night to close Clifton Elementary School. I believe that their vote was misguided and wasteful. Judging from the tears on the faces of the children and many of the parents at the hearing and over the last several days, the impact of the decision will be devastating to the children, residents and businesses of Clifton.

The School Board did not have to close Clifton ES. As I describe more fully below, there was no compelling case to close Clifton Elementary School. In fact there was a compelling case to keep it open:

- It is one of Fairfax County's best performing elementary schools
- There were financial benefits if the school were kept open
- The issues with the well water were resolved in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour (although remaining the primary reason members cited for closing the school)
- The school is **not** in dire need of a renovation and the parents of Clifton ES lobbied to wait years for a renovation.

- There was a win-win resolution available that would benefit the entire county by accelerating renovations on other schools (including West Springfield High School) and leave the school open.

### **My Thoughts and Why it is Important to You**

The bottom line is I feel that the Fairfax County Public School (FCPS) system made the decision to close Clifton ES well before they started the community engagement process, which was nothing more than a dog and pony show. Every point FCPS made in favor of closing the school, the Clifton community responded with facts and statistics showing that FCPS was either wrong or at a minimum using incomplete data. As a result, FCPS would simply change their justification for closing the school. But FCPS and the majority of the School Board refused to consider any of it because they were determined to close the school no matter what.

You may be asking yourself, “Why should I care about a school closing in Clifton?” You should care because if this ever happens in your community you need to know this is how FCPS currently operates. The decision is made before they actually study anything, let the facts be damned. I wish I could say this was an isolated incident, just a one time case of bad judgment, but unfortunately it is par for the course with FCPS.

On everything from the school budget, to their attempt to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a fancy new administrative building, to VGLA testing, to school renovations, FCPS staff and the School Board have shown they are unwilling to make sound decisions and engage their citizenry in a constructive, meaningful dialogue. It is absolutely time for the public to hold them to a much higher standard. I hope you will join me in that effort.

### **No Compelling Case to Close Clifton ES**

Before the vote to close Clifton ES, one School Board Member challenged the other Board Members to cite the “compelling case to close Clifton ES”. No School Board Member offered the compelling case, not even the maker of the motion to close the school, Springfield District Representative Liz Bradsher. The School Board Chair reminded her fellow Board Members that staff had given them the reasons and that they were on the web site. However, the web site offered no compelling case to close the school:

- **Problems with the Well Water.** Clifton ES is served by well water and some of the wells have had water quality issues in the past. Throughout this entire process FCPS staff cited the well water as the chief reason renovation and ongoing operating expenses at the school were high. Amazingly at the meeting they continued to reference these reasons even though the FCPS Chief Operating Officer (COO) Dean Tistadt released a report minutes before the meeting that said they had fixed the third well and that its flow was adequate and the water safe (pending the outcome of a final test and all indications are that this test will be

positive as well). Pardon the pun but this part of the “compelling case” holds no water.

- **Declining Enrollment.** FCPS staff, under the direction of Mr. Tisdadt, are projecting the enrollment of Clifton ES to decrease to 298 students by 2015 (it was at 369 this past year) and thus claimed it would not be cost effective to renovate Clifton ES on a per student basis. The problem with basing such an important decision on FCPS enrollment projections is that FCPS has a *horrible track record of projecting enrollment. This is one of the main reasons the four School Board Members voted to delay for three years because they know firsthand* how bad the staff is with projecting enrollment. One School Board Member actually pulled out some old documents and read off multiple years of projections for Colin Powell ES, noting how wrong FCPS was year after year. Staff had no response.

It was also very odd to see the School Board endorse Mr. Tisdadt’s enrollment projections when they know firsthand how incredibly inaccurate staff was at projecting the enrollment of schools like South County Secondary School and Westfields High School. There are numerous other examples throughout the county of faulty school by school projections.

The Clifton community also presented a compelling case, citing actual housing transactions, that enrollment would not be declining. They also presented a compelling case for how the school could be expanded to 550 to help solve the capacity problems in this section of the county. See below for more detail on the irony of closing a school when you have capacity issues and need to build additional facilities.

In addition, national studies indicate that for learning – smaller is better and that the optimal size for elementary schools is between 300 – 500 leaving Clifton within that range. The outstanding performance of Clifton as well as other small schools throughout this country proves this point.

- **Difficult/Expensive to Renovate.** Another reason listed was that site constraints made the renovation of Clifton too expensive and difficult. This argument largely faded into the background as parents and the community argued for no renovation. Instead of just trying to address one or two of the areas where Clifton ES did not meet the education specification, FCPS inflated the cost of a renovation by calling for gold standard educational specs including a geothermal wall. The parents of Clifton did not want anything done to the school, it is ALREADY one of the highest performing schools in the county, but the School Board insisted on telling the parents “we know what’s best for your children”. The whole educational specs argument became so ridiculous during this process that one School Board Member said during the discussion on the motion to close the school that FCPS needs to take a serious look at what they require and determine if it is something they can afford going forward. Think about it, FCPS

just closed one of the highest performing schools in the county because it was too expensive to implement gold standard educational specs that the parents did not want. How does that make any sense?

- **Closing Clifton “Saves” Money.** FCPS will try and tell you that they have saved the \$11 million it would cost to renovate Clifton ES and that money will be put into the renovation queue accelerating all other projects. But that is only true because FCPS is using an accountant gimmick. There are still serious capacity issues in the Southwestern portion of the county (made even worse because they just closed a school in this section of the county!) that will have to be dealt with either by building a new school or by adding capacity to multiple existing elementary schools. This means that millions of dollars are still going to be spent on something other than the renovation queue. According to FCPS that money comes out of a “different pot” though. The bottom line is this does not save FCPS any money overall because they are closing one school to build additions or another new school. In fact the only real way to save money was to keep Clifton ES open with no or limited renovations. This would have put money back into the renovation queue and reduced the need for additional capacity to be built.

### **Unanswered Questions**

I must point out that not all School Board Members fell for the ridiculous arguments of staff. Tina Hone argued strenuously on behalf of Clifton ES and made a motion to delay this decision for up to three years so FCPS could get answers to the many unanswered questions and continue to monitor the enrollment numbers. Sandy Evans, Jim Raney and Ilryong Moon all supported her. These four School Board members also did a great job of asking tough questions and poking holes in every one of the staff’s reasons for closing the school. It was very refreshing to see these four School Board Members looking for real answers from FCPS staff and to see the staff unable to refute so many of their great points.

- **Where Will the Children of Clifton ES Go to School?** Unbelievably there is no answer. Staff lists 4 or 5 surrounding schools with some capacity but no answers. It appears a possibility the Clifton students and community will be divided up to multiple schools – at no time in the last 20 plus years has that happened in Fairfax County.
- **Unanswered School Board Questions?** In response to the final thirty-two questions about Clifton ES posed by School Board members, eight questions were answered by FCPS staff with “additional information pending” or “response pending”. How the School Board could make such an important decision while so many of their own questions went unanswered by staff is unfathomable.
- **How Will We Solve the Capacity Problems in Southwest County?** It seems sheer lunacy to close a school when you have school capacity problems in that section of the county but that is what the School Board decided. To make matters

worse they did it without the answer to how they will solve their capacity issues or what it will cost them. The original recommendation by school staff was to build a new school at the Liberty MS site and close Clifton ES. They changed the recommendation to just close Clifton ES because they could not show closing Clifton resulted in cost savings. Now we are left with the capacity issues.

- **What Will They Do with the Building?** Unbelievably again there is no answer. Initially the answer was to give it to the Town of Clifton but they have said they can't afford it. It likely will be returned to the county where it will become another liability for Fairfax County taxpayers.

### **What Really Happened?**

Why did they vote to close the school? I am not 100% sure why FCPS staff was so adamant about closing this school. That is a question only FCPS staff and certain members of the School Board know the real answer to. I can tell you this though; I believe that it had nothing to do with "saving money" or getting to the best answer for the citizens of Clifton or the entire county. The most cost effective option was to defer renovation on Clifton ES indefinitely and put the money back into the renovation queue. But again, from the beginning this wasn't about saving money, it was about closing this particular school no matter what.

In the end a majority of School Board Members (specifically Liz Bradsher, Tessie Wilson, Stu Gibson, Dan Storck, Kathy Smith, Janie Strauss and Brad Center) refused to consider any options and blindly followed staff's lead. In addition, these School Board Members had the audacity to tell the parents of Clifton ES that they knew what was best for their children. They told the parents that it was not right for their children to continue to attend an un-renovated school even though the school is operating just fine today and is one of the highest performing elementary schools in the county.

### **Thanks**

I want to thank the members of the Clifton community who stepped up and challenged FCPS on this horrible decision. I don't want to list names because there were so many dedicated people involved and I fear I might leave somebody out. But you know who you are and I thank you for the hundreds and hundreds of hours you spent fighting on behalf of the children of Clifton and especially for coming up with and advocating for a solution that benefited EVERY child in this county, not just your own. It is a shame you couldn't count on the School Board to do the same.

I also want to thank the School Board members that risked being at odds with school staff (unfortunately an uncomfortable place to be) and asking the intelligent questions that staff should have been asking - most notably - Tina Hone, Sandy Evans and Patty Reed as well as Jim Raney and Illyrong Moon. I hope you continue your search for the best answer and keep asking the tough questions.

## **It's Not Over**

The battle for Clifton ES is not over and I am pleased to inform you that a number of efforts are underway. Community members are working on many fronts with some examples including historic preservation funding/process, the upcoming fall boundary study goals, and yes, a group is researching the basis and results of prior legal actions taken in similar situations around Fairfax County.

I will keep you informed in future versions of the *Herrity Report* and encourage you to sign up at <http://www.savecliftonelementary.org/> for more regular information.

## **My Testimony on Saving Clifton ES Before the School Board**

At the June 28<sup>th</sup> public hearing I delivered testimony to the School board on a solution that I thought was a win-win solution that would keep Clifton ES open and accelerate the renovation of other schools (including West Springfield HS).

### **Testimony of Supervisor Pat Herrity Clifton Elementary School Public Hearing June 28, 2010**

Chairman Smith and members of the School Board, my name is Pat Herrity and I am the Springfield District Supervisor and a resident of Little Rocky Run.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you again tonight. I apologize for not having prepared remarks, I left my family at the Outer Banks early this morning to get back here to testify and I did not have time to copy my remarks. I will send them to you tomorrow.

Tonight I am here to speak on behalf of many of my constituents and to respectfully request that you keep Clifton Elementary School open. I am not going repeat many of the arguments you have heard tonight but I want to discuss a possible solution.

I believe one option and perhaps the best option is to defer renovation and not close Clifton Elementary, something you have heard tonight from parents of the Clifton community. Clifton does not need an immediate full scale renovation.

Keeping Clifton ES open and deferring renovation would be beneficial for four major reasons and could be a win-win solution for the entire county:

- 1) It allows the Clifton community to keep their community school
- 2) It puts \$11 million back into the CIP, allowing schools throughout the county that are in dire need of renovation to move up on the CIP. A win-win for Clifton and school communities throughout the entire county.
- 3) Per today's letter from Virginia's Department of Historic Resources, it gives us time to explore the potential use of creative partnerships and historic

rehabilitation tax credits to rehabilitate school buildings for continued educational use.

- 4) It keeps options open for the future – most importantly for future expansion to address the overcrowding or some form of renovation

The study to close Clifton ES was included with a Southwestern Boundary study and those capacity issues have yet to be addressed. The initial recommendation was to build at the Liberty MS site and close Clifton ES. I ask you to please consider the very real and serious challenges posed by the Liberty Middle School site.

- 1) Traffic from the four current schools plus the proposed new school on two lane Union Mill Road
- 2) The location is not near the overpopulated schools
- 3) There are serious health and cost issues with naturally occurring asbestos at the site
- 4) Cost

And if these issues can't be overcome and you can't build a new school at Liberty, what will happen to children at Clifton? Won't the kids be sent to three or four different elementary schools? At no time in the last 20 years has Fairfax County closed an elementary school and broken school population into three or four different elementary schools. It's not right to do it now to the Clifton community; especially when there is an option on the table that keeps Clifton ES open AND puts \$11 million back into the CIP. So let me make recent school closing history a fifth major reason to keep the school open and a key difference from the Graham Road closing.

Again I ask that you please consider deferring renovation on Clifton ES and keeping it open because it is the solution that is in the best interest of:

- The students
- The Clifton community
- And the entire county because it accelerates the CIP

Clifton **is** a community school and the parents are willing to forgo a full renovation in order to save this school. There are options on the table that work for Clifton, the school system and this School Board – let's take the time to find them. Please keep this school open. Thank you.

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The *Herrity Report* is a monthly publication from the Office of Supervisor Pat Herrity to keep citizens informed on the issues facing Fairfax County. Communication is important to Supervisor Herrity and he encourages your feedback on the items in the *Report* or other issues that concern you. Past issues of the *Herrity Report* can be found at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/springfield/herrity-report-newsletter.htm>. To sign up for the *Herrity Report* please go to <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/springfield>. If you no longer wish to receive the *Herrity Report*, please send an e-mail to [springfield@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:springfield@fairfaxcounty.gov) with "Unsubscribe" in the subject line or call us at 703-451-8873.