

Testimony before the DC City Council Committee of the Whole
Hearing on the Master Facilities Plan -- March 26, 2009
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Parent of DCPS high schoolers (Walls and Wilson) and neighbor of Eastern SHS

Good evening Chairman Gray. Thank you for this hearing.

I am here today as a neighbor of Eastern SHS and the parent of two DCPS high schoolers. And I urge the Council to evaluate the MFP's community engagement component.

I'll offer two examples illustrating why I believe OPEFM cannot be given what amounts to sole responsibility for community engagement regarding our school modernization dollars and plans. My written testimony offers suggestions for alternative ways to manage the School Improvement Team process.

Attached to my testimony are five pages from recent OPEFM documents regarding renovation of the School Without Walls. I can go over the details, if desired, but the upshot is that MFP information for my son's school does not match the facts about the building or its planned program. In addition, it's internally contradictory – with square footage of the existing building variously listed as 32,000, 59,000 and 274,000 in the same document.

As someone who works in print, I realize that errors happen. But I also believe that public document providers must aim for accuracy and respond when errors occur. Because the information about Walls was so wrong – the year of original construction was off by half a century and the ward was wrong, for example – I assumed that some odd mishap had occurred which OPEFM would want to correct. Several other members of the Walls community also contacted OPEFM. The result was a new version which does *not* incorporate basic corrections.

In addition, the “mini-master plan” for Walls – as for other schools under current construction – carries a disclaimer saying that information is conceptual and will be updated once detailed specifications are developed. This means that, even in cases where work is on-going or already complete, the community is given no details or offered ones that are so far off the mark as to be laughable...

...And, as it happens, earlier this month, I was with some Walls students who were discussing the changes to the Grant building, where they will return in September. Thinking the MFP would provide useful details, I opened my laptop only to discover that the figures were useless. When students are laughing at a major public document and saying, “well, what could we expect,” our democracy is in trouble.

Whatever the reasons, OPEFM is not providing accurate, public-friendly documents – and this hampers useful public engagement.

In addition, OPEFM on its own – and in collaboration with DCPS – has not yet managed to engage the Eastern SHS community in an open, inclusive School Improvement Team process. The information provided in the MFP and other documents describing the SIT process is sketchy or inconsistent, especially with regard to swing space and general community outreach. Moreover, OPEFM seems incapable of setting advance meeting dates and disseminating that information to all stakeholders.

Attached to my testimony are screen shots showing an announcement for an April 16 SIT meeting at Eastern which OPEFM originally scheduled for a school holiday and then rescheduled for April 15. The wrong date remains on the agency calendar, however, and OPEFM has done no outreach for either date. And then last week, OPEFM announced that the whole thing might be canceled or held on a Saturday morning in May. Without a decision and some outreach, whatever is finally scheduled will fail to engage stakeholders.

There are contingencies beyond OPEFM's control -- the complete lack of an educational vision for Eastern, due to the Chancellor's long delay in discussing the school's future, for example. If active, inclusive engagement of the community were a goal, however, OPEFM could be organizing the SIT process to affect that.

Before closing my testimony, I want to take just a moment to address this issue of the delay in Eastern's planning.

At the DCPS oversight hearing on March 11, I explained how the Eastern SHS community had endured an eight-month silence from DCPS and OPEFM regarding the school's academic future and physical modernization.

From May 15, 2008, when the program phase-out was announced in a DCPS press release but never brought to the community for discussion, until January 24, 2009, when a meeting on the "future of Eastern SHS" was announced with 8 days advance notice and promoted almost exclusively via internet, DCPS offered nothing but "soon" regarding planning for Eastern.

This eight-month silence came DCPS failed to include the phase-out in any of the Fall 2007 meetings on school reorganizing and right-sizing – which also means, of course, that Eastern's phase out was not discussed in last year's Council hearings on DCPS plans. There was no hearing on effectively closing this high school.

In response to my March 11 testimony, the Chancellor noted during questioning that there were 150 people at a "future of Eastern" meeting and that 50 people joined an Academic Planning team. I didn't hear any Councilmember challenge Ms. Rhee publicly on what I would call, at best, "half facts." So I want to reiterate and clarify: The community events the Chancellor referenced took place in February of 2009, after eight full months of silence.

Yes, it's true that 150 people were at the February 4, 2009 meeting on Eastern's future. But this does not alter the eight-month silence. If anything, the large attendance points out how much interest there has been in Eastern's future all along; and many participants took time at the February 2009 meeting to make clear their deep frustration with the prior lack of inclusion.

Similarly, it is true that the 50 people joined the Academic Planning team. But this does not alter the fact that many of these 50 people had been asking for that opportunity since May of 2008. And the turnout at the first meeting – which was held in February of 2009 – in now way addresses the fact that DCPS' failure to begin these meetings in a timely fashion is the reason that there is no academic vision for Eastern.

OPEFM meanwhile did not make any effort to engage the Eastern community, even though modernization has been long been slated for June 2009. Whether they were awaiting the Chancellor's vision or the MFP's approval or a visit from Godot, it seems to me that OPEFM could have contacted the relevant community organizations, gotten representatives together to discuss basic issues and organize – as their own documents outline. But this did not even begin until a few weeks ago, even though the RFP was released last year.

Alternative ONE?

The Office of Planning focuses on historic preservation as well as neighborhood priorities for development and infrastructure – all of which are important in modernizing schools; it regularly works with neighborhood economic and demographic data – which is also helpful for this work; and it has neighborhood planning staff who are familiar with people, organizations and issues within each ward – as absolute essential, in my opinion, for arranging community input.

Alternative TWO?

With DCPS and OPEFM reporting directly to the Mayor, there is no check or balance. Could the SIT process somehow be organized by an outside agency – or even the Council?

Random Note:

Four high schools are listed as surplussing more square feet than School Without Walls uses altogether. --
What will happen to that space??