

Loudoun County, Purcellville end stalemate over school locale

By David Sherfinski
Examiner Staff Writer

Loudoun County and the town of Purcellville have reached a tentative deal on the construction of Woodgrove High School on Fields Farm north of the town, bringing to a close about two years of lawsuits and political stalemates that delayed the project.

"Board members, ladies and gentlemen of the public ... it appears that we have reached settlement with the town of Purcellville and that we can begin to move forward with construction of HS-3," said Board of Supervisors Chairman Scott York, I-at large.

"It has been a long, hard tow and certainly now we can begin to do what we need to do to begin the process of construction and relieving the overcrowding situation at Loudoun Valley."

In 2006, the school board chose the county-owned Fields Farm for the school's future site, leading to a legal battle between the town and county over the property.

"I want folks to understand that there is a lot of faith being taken by both sides in this process," said York. "There are still many legislative acts that [still] have to occur to get to the point of the opening of the school."

"I'm just hopeful that the town will work actively, proactively with the schools to make the opening happen," said Jim Burton, I-Blue Ridge. "If they do, if everyone works together, I am very confident that the school can open in the fall of 2010. ... I'm hopeful that the spirit of this agreement will be followed by all parties."

Purcellville Mayor Bob Lazaro said transportation issues and potential congestion were major obstacles to coming to an agreement.

The county has pledged \$5.78 million to the town for upgrading the road system to accommodate the extra traffic the school would create.

"It's quite an impact [on the town]," Lazaro said. "Chairman York and Jim Burton; I appreciate the fact that they recognize the concerns of the town. There's been a lot of history on this, and it's time to move this forward to make this school happen."

Construction on the project is expected to begin early next year, said Loudoun public schools spokesman Wade Byard.

"We are anticipating moving ahead, and 2010 remains the opening," he said.

dsherfinski@dcexaminer.com



Md. employees' fringe benefits grow more costly, analysts say

Pension, health insurance expenses squeeze budget

By Len Lazarick
Examiner Staff Writer

Pay freezes and furloughs for state employees are being discussed by lawmakers and the O'Malley administration as ways to deal with a fiscal crunch in the coming year.

But even if salaries are frozen, the cost of fringe benefits is expected to top 40 percent of payroll in four years, while it was under 30 percent just three years ago, according to legislative analysts.

Warren Deschenaux, the General Assembly's chief fiscal analyst, told lawmakers Wednesday that is largely because the state must increase its funding for pensions and health insurance for retirees. He is recommending that legislators look at reducing some of these benefits if they want to hold down future spending.

That forecast was reinforced Wednesday by the actuaries for the state retirement system who told the joint pension committee that Maryland would need to increase

"It's a very gloomy picture."



— Sen. Nathaniel McFadden, co-chairman of the pension committee

its pension contribution more than \$100 million for both fiscal 2010 and 2011. The current payment is more than \$1.1 billion, and that's before major payments for retiree health care are thrown in.

"It's a very gloomy picture," said Sen. Nathaniel McFadden, co-chairman of the pension committee.

The picture is made gloomier by the sharp stock market decline, which has reduced the pension fund about 25 percent this year, according to Dean Kenderdine, director of the pension system. He said that is comparable with other states, though California and Florida have had more serious declines.

The future liability for retiree health benefits now stands at about \$14 billion, and payments to fund

that have been cut in the face of other budget needs.

A blue ribbon commission on retiree health benefits is working on a solution and is due to make recommendations next year.

"We cannot look at this liability without looking at every possible approach," said Del. Melanie Griffith, co-chairwoman of both the blue ribbon commission and the joint pension committee. "We want to consider every possible mechanism."

Sue Esty, legislative director for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees — the largest union representing state workers — said, "Maryland is ahead of many states" in funding future health benefits.

"These benefits have always been an obligation, but now they're more visible," Esty said. "They ought to look at ways to fund it, not ways to cut it."

If the state starts cutting retirement benefits, Esty said, "it's just going to increase the crisis we have now" in recruiting and retaining state employees, who often go to county governments or the private sector for better benefits or better pay.

llazarick@baltimoreexaminer.com

Montgomery County cuts ribbon on first housing program for work force

By Kathleen Miller
Examiner Staff Writer

Montgomery County officials are taking their first stab at providing affordable housing for government employees today, putting 49 partially subsidized condos on the market.

County and Rockville employees can apply to purchase one of 49 condos in the Village at King Farm, part of Rockville's King Farm community. The county will spend \$9.5 million on the complex, when financing is included, plus about \$26,000 per condo to upgrade them and remodel common areas.

The two- and three-bedroom units are now on the market for between \$205,000 and \$380,000 apiece, with priority given to first responders and teachers, although other Montgomery and Rockville workers and residents can also apply. Condos with two or more bedrooms nearby have sold for between \$400,000 and \$458,000 during the past six months.

Local union leaders have long complained that Montgomery County is too expensive for many of their members.

In the spring, Bonnie Cullison, president of the Montgomery County Education Association, reminded council members that nearly one in three of Montgomery's teachers live outside the county. Police officials say roughly 27 percent of officers live elsewhere too.

John Sparks, head of the Montgomery County fire and rescue workers



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Montgomery County officials put 49 partially subsidized condominiums for government employees on the market today in Rockville's Village at King Farm.

At a glance

Montgomery County home prices
 » Population: 952,500
 » Households: 356,400
 » At-Place Employment: 504,680
 » Median Household Income: \$91,641

SOURCE: MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLANNING DEPARTMENT

union, said Wednesday that 80 percent of his members live outside the county.

"Probably some of them that do live here live with their parents," Sparks said. "It's terrible. If you are a first-time homebuyer, I think this program is something our members would strongly consider."

Rick Nelson, head of the county's

department of housing and community affairs, said it is worrisome to have the vast majority of fire and rescue workers living outside Montgomery.

"If there is a catastrophe or fire, and you need to call people in, well some of them live a few hours away," Nelson said. "That's no good."

The school district sends a bus to West Virginia that picks up teachers before dawn every day to bring them to work in Montgomery County, Nelson said.

"We have people getting on a bus at 4:30 in the morning who then have to teach our kids," Nelson said. "That means they are tired when they get to work, that's not good for anybody."

The condos are expected to be ready for occupancy by the end of February.

kmiller@dcexaminer.com

THE 3-MINUTE INTERVIEW

Andrea Powell

Andrea Powell is the executive director and co-founder of FAIR Fund, an anti-human trafficking group in Washington that helps rescue children from international flesh peddlers. The privately funded group was founded in 2003. With an annual budget of about \$250,000 and a staff of six, FAIR Fund fans out all over the capital region, racing to help rescued girls and trying to keep local children from having to be rescued.



Why do we need an anti-trafficking group in D.C.? The District of Columbia is listed as one of the top 10 places for trafficking in the United States. International trafficking is a major problem here. We've seen several major cases in the region. There are up to 25 girls identified per month as being sexually exploited.

How did you get involved? When I was in college I studied abroad in Germany. I had a 19-year-old friend named Rafiq, who was a mail-order bride. And she disappeared. It's a very personal issue for me.

What happened to her? I don't know.

Given that D.C. is such an international place, does it make it harder to combat trafficking? I think there's a lot more work to be done. But there's a very vibrant anti-trafficking community.

Has the international dimension gotten bigger or smaller over the last few years? I think the international dimension has gotten more exposed. With the awareness raising, it's not that the problem has gotten bigger, it's that it's gotten better understood. I've seen cases where the victim is not identified by a police officer, but by a neighbor who learned about trafficking from TV or the newspapers. But certainly globalization has played a role. It's easier to move people in and out of countries.

What can an ordinary person do if he suspects there's trafficking going on? They should call the National Human Trafficking Hotline, 888-373-7888. — Bill Myers

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D.C. toddler beaten to death; man arrested

Detectives on Wednesday afternoon arrested a man in connection with the beating death of a toddler, D.C. police said.

Twenty-one-month-old Ronjai Butler, of the 1200 block of North Capitol Street NW, was taken to Howard University on Sunday and was pronounced dead.

Police on Wednesday night had not released the identity of the suspect, but a department spokesman said the man lived in the same residence as Ronjai.

Ronjai's family was known to child welfare bureaucrats. His half-sister was the subject of a neglect complaint that was later closed, Councilman Tommy Wells, D-Ward 6, told *The Examiner*.

Anyone with information about the incident is asked to call police at 202-727-9099.

— Scott McCabe and Bill Myers