September 11, 2013

Garrett County Board of Education
Administration Building
40 South Second Street
Oakland, Maryland 21550

Attention: Dr. Janet Wilson, Superintendent

Re: Potential Consolidation of Schools Design Review

File: DP-1

Dear Dr. Wilson:

We appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and staff in regards to developing a plan to address potential built facility issues if funding shortfalls necessitate the need to reduce the number of educational buildings in operation. We understand that this is an emotionally charged topic as the local schools are the center of the various communities in which they reside.

Per the data shared at our meeting of August 5, 2013 the Garrett County Board of Education’s (GCBOE) system has 850 seats in need of students with 3 elementary schools being recently shuttered. With the opening of the 2013/2014 school year this has increased to nearly 1,000 unfilled seats. There are 7 private schools in the County and a very large home-schooled population that ultimately affects the number of students attending the public school system. While closing more facilities will help to eliminate some costs, other costs such as transportation will increase due to the distance traveled to get students to another facility. The closed facilities will still require exterior maintenance and maintaining watertightness of buildings and, possibly heating costs to prevent damage to the facility until re-purposed, demolished, transferred or sold. All options will have expenses for unknown durations though it could be mitigated if a closed facility is sold or transferred to another entity sooner than later.

The main purpose of the meeting was to determine if existing educational buildings have to be shuttered what could be accomplish to absorb the displaced students at the remaining facilities and how. The current approach would be to realign the schools based on grade levels as all schools have the ability to handle additional students. Though a few buildings would be closer to capacity by shifting grade levels; it would only change the current levels slightly with only one school projected to be overcapacity. This would entail adjusting grade levels at the high schools to 8-12 facilities in lieu of 9-12; middle schools to 4-7 in lieu of 6-8; and the elementary schools from Pre-K/K-3 in lieu of Pre-K/K-5 grade levels; however, this is not a final determination or a even a recommendation by the Garrett County Board of Education.

The Garrett County High Schools can add an additional grade level to both county high schools with minimal impact. Actually grades 7 & 8 could both be moved into the Northern High facility based on student enrollment numbers only without major effects if needed. A building addition would be required if the 7th grade would be moved into Southern High School. The Garrett County Middle Schools would house four grade levels by moving the 8th grade levels to the high schools. Northern Middle which was recently renovated can be easily adapted to accommodate this. Southern Middle is more of a challenge but could be done with a major renovation.
The remaining students can then be integrated into the remaining elementary schools which have excess capacity as they currently exist per enrollment numbers. Unfortunately, elementary schools are the majority of the system with excess capacity; therefore these facilities would need to be combined into larger student bodies allowing more efficient use of built spaces, staff, and resources. The limited number of middle and high schools will generally prevent them from disappearing but if student population continues to decline as well as funding levels for the GCBOE then K/6 and 7-12 facilities may have and need to be considered. And, worst case scenario, if civic pride can be overcome, a single high school could be an option as a 9-12 facility that would be centrally located in the County with two K-8 facilities to matriculate to it.

Studying an option to integrate 4th and 5th grade levels into the middle schools would be the most pressing concern to which we offer the following paragraphs below. However there are a few questions that will need to be addressed prior any formal design solutions. These would need to address student class size; how specialty classes (Gifted, Special Ed, Arts and Music, etc) will be handled; do separate toilet facilities need to be provided; and can gymnasium and cafeteria usage be shared just to name a few.

To our knowledge there is no set classroom size that would lock in the potential number of classrooms in any one facility other than existing classroom sizes to accommodate ‘x’ number of students. It appears many of the elementary facilities are currently functioning as a 1 round building based on enrollment numbers but we are not sure if they were originally designed as such. The facilities, if integrated, may not have excess flex spaces or areas that will handle small breakout areas for special activities or learning opportunities. We have made the assumption for a typical standard classroom student population at 25 students but larger and smaller classes could and will occur. We have made an assumption looking at the projections of enrollment for each building per grade level if student numbers exceeded thirty or multiple thereof that another classroom would be needed. This affects the number of spaces that could be required in a facility. It is understood that the community will want some separation of students between certain grade levels in the middle and high school settings. Specialized services such as Special Ed could be limited in consolidation unless additional spaces can be provided to support those programs.

Northern Middle School (NMS) - This school was renovated in 2009 which added additions to the building at a number of areas to get to the approximately 84,000 sf current size. The design concept initially set up classrooms loosely arranged per grade levels with a science wing on the end. This will allow for separation of the 4th and 5th grades from the 6th and 7th grades fairly easily with the addition of a few well placed doors and relocation of a couple classroom doors to access another corridor. The concern will be restrooms as there are only two main student toilets rooms per sex and they are centrally located in the building but away from the main classroom wing. Students will also have to share certain facilities such as gymnasium, music, art and cafeteria areas. While this is a daily timing issue that can be coordinated as needed, the movement of students outside of scheduled class changes will still need to be monitored. Bathroom breaks and travel distances to them will be issues of concern whether or not they are shared by all grade levels. Northern Middle has enough classroom space for the 4-7 grade levels based on 25 students per class and translates into a 4 round school with some flex spaces which are basically the science classrooms. Adding additional toilets could be problematic and may require an addition and extension of sewer and water lines.

Southern Middle School (SMS) – This is a 1977 constructed building conceived as an open plan school with 92,000 sf. The open plan layout has disappeared in a haphazard arrangement of spaces that poses safety concerns and disruptions for routine access to various class spaces. This school has been slated for renovation for a number of years that keeps getting pushed out due to CIP funding concerns. While the exterior is nicely maintained, it is showing its age. On the other hand, the interior presents a dismal place for education with the lack of natural day lighting, odd-shaped, and odd-sized classrooms which could be two or more deep without direct corridor access. It is an egress nightmare and not conducive to the educational process. While it is possible to move 4th and 5th grade classes into a dedicated area of the building it will cause the remainder of the
building to undergo substantial changes to accommodate the other displaced classes for the remaining 6th and 7th grades. The entire core of the building will need to be renovated to provide the minimum 7 classrooms per grade level without modification to the cafeteria or gymnasium areas. This is based strictly on the projected enrollment numbers. The tech areas could also be affected due to needing additional core classroom areas causing one of three things to happen.

1) Elimination of Tech Ed areas,
2) Building additional space to provide for this needed educational component at additional cost, or
3) Moving Tech Ed classes and the 7th grade to Southern High School to accommodate the specific equipment for the Tech Ed programs.

The last option will present other challenges due to the fact that moving the 8th grade into Southern High School will exceed the state rated capacity; so unless the high school’s boundaries are adjusted, moving the 7th grade into the facility would not be feasible unless an addition is made to the high school which will require additional funding.

Southern Middle School needs to be completely renovated with the intent to provide 4th and 5th grades in the building and if that does not occur, then it would still function as a typical middle school. The same issues for class changes and shared areas as noted for NMS would also be applicable to SMS regardless of any renovation. The assumption is that the changes would be locally funded and at the minimal cost possible. However, the GCBOE could be essentially throwing away funding for the entire renovation project.

This could limit or even jeopardize state funding when the full renovation does occur in the future at a later date or limit the amount if the State would participate in getting SMS partially renovated. Is the Board willing to tear up what was just completed when the full renovation occurs? Since some systems will have to be upgraded as the current systems may not be compatible to old equipment and for those systems where new components are added compatibility issues will develop. The State participation on future renovation or additional funding will likely decrease since work to improve the school has been done. The renovations would end up as a hodgepodge in design and execution, though it would be an improvement to what is there currently; it would still be a substandard investment and would not have the positive impact and improvement that a full and complete renovation would have.

We estimate that needed renovations of the building would include anywhere from two-thirds or more of the built area. This would not include upgrading all systems for heating, fire alarm, intercom, electrical and others systems in order to minimize cost. The renovation would not specifically address circulation and security issues, life safety concerns, educational programs expansion and modification. An example, the office area is in the middle of the building and cannot adequately monitor visitors coming in or out of the facility. Another is the site issues for traffic flow that will be further compounded as it is combined with Broad Ford ES with the additional buses and parent drop-offs. Based on a square footage comparison, SMS is 20,000 sf short of similar spaces as at the renovated NMS.

Other necessary modifications to the remaining elementary schools may be needed depending on which schools remain open and which would close. The projected enrollment numbers based on the combined student body to anyone school and their existing instructional spaces will need to be evaluated for each. While it would appear to have excess student capacity at any of the schools, additional classroom space may be required to keep class sizes reasonable, or for specialty instruction purposes. This could be further compounded by public reaction to the closings by increasing more home-schooled students, or Montessori/private schools appearing.
Timing for design and construction of the partial renovation will need at least a year to layout and assemble bid documents for contractor bidding, and then to perform the actual construction. Any savings from consolidation therefore is at least a year out as it will take more time than a summer break to design and construct the modified layout for a 4-7 grade level school. The timeframe for a complete renovation would be approximately 2 – 2 ½ years. This does not include any time to develop the Education Specifications or building program that GCBOE will need to assemble for the design and construction team. Keep in mind that if Southern Middle renovations are done as a two phase process, a larger student body will increase any phasing or temporary relocation costs.

Development of the Ed Spec is crucial whether partial or full renovations are considered. Today’s learning environment is drastically different than just ten years ago. There is more interdisciplinary work requiring smaller group spaces and combined class areas. While in the mid 70’s/early 80’s, open schools were not liked as the GCBOE learned as both SMS and NMS were open plan schools. It may be more suitable today, where technology is so portable with collaboration of many classes/activities, that it can support many different current learning environments.

Cost projections are difficult to ascertain at this time without a defined program or scope of work but we offer the following for budgeting purposes. We do not include any projections for modifications to the elementary or high school facilities.

**Middle School Modifications**

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<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Partial Renovation</th>
<th>Full Renovation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Northern Middle School</strong></td>
<td>Design $10,000</td>
<td>Design $10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Toilet Rm. addition (optional) Design $10,000</td>
<td>Construction $50,000</td>
<td>Construction $100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Southern Middle School</strong></td>
<td>Design Arch $385,000</td>
<td>Design Arch $700,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partial Renovation MEP $200,000</td>
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<td>South Middle School Full Renovation Design Arch $700,000</td>
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<td>Full Renovation MEP $360,000</td>
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<td>Full Renovation Civil $130,000</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong> $1,290,000</td>
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Consolidation of schools in Garrett County can be achieved based on the projected enrollments and the existing facilities as they currently exist. However some modifications will be necessary to achieve that goal. Some can reasonably be accomplished like that at Northern Middle to create a 4-7 grade level facility. Southern Middle should be fully renovated before going to a 4-7 grade facility as many issues need to be addressed within the existing building.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact this office. We appreciate the opportunity to assist the Garrett County Board of Education. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to call.

Respectfully,

BUSHEY FREIGHT-MORIN ARCHITECTS

Michael L. Gehr, AIA, Principal

MLG/lld