

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Megan DiNicola, and I am proud to serve as the SSIMS PTSA President this year, representing a beautifully diverse, resilient, and deeply invested school community.

I want to begin by acknowledging Superintendent Dr. Taylor and his team. His more holistic, data-driven approach to the Capital Improvement Program is commendable and reflects necessary big-picture thinking. At the same time, this approach has highlighted a difficult truth: for many years, prior stewardship of the MCPS facilities portfolio did not adequately plan or budget to keep pace with infrastructure needs. In many cases, spending has been lopsided—large-scale capital projects have consumed the majority of available funds, while routine maintenance and smaller but urgent facility needs have been deferred or ignored.

I also appreciate the County Executive's recommendation to partially fund the CIP while explicitly opposing school closures, capacity expansions, and premature decisions regarding Sligo Creek Elementary. That approach reflects both fiscal constraints and the concerns raised by families across the county this fall.

We all recognize that the CIP will not be fully funded. As a taxpayer, I understand those limitations. But as a parent and school community leader, I also know—deeply and personally—that many students are learning in environments that fall short of what they deserve. This reality makes it essential to closely examine MCPS revenue sources, allocation of funds, and accountability structures. Capital projects should begin with clearly defined goals, meaningful community input, proper budgeting, and a fair distribution of resources across the system.

Many districts nationwide face similar challenges. I hope MCPS and the County will look to successful alternative funding and delivery models, such as the public-private partnership program in Prince George's County, which has already delivered multiple new schools. These models demonstrate that constraints do not preclude innovation.

My central question for the Council is this: **does our current capital funding framework adequately manage risk?**

The absence of available or approved funds does not eliminate need. It signals a structural budgeting failure—particularly in how MCPS handles urgent facility issues that fall outside traditional emergency definitions but still pose serious life-safety, accessibility, health, or liability risks.

Stairwell 7 at Silver Spring International Middle School is a prime example. It is infamous, well-documented, and has been described by MCPS as “unsolvable” for more than four decades. Yet it presents a daily, immediate life-safety risk to students and staff. In December, a congestion incident involving pushing, trampling, and a stacked egress stair exceeded the ability of security staff and administrators to safely manage the situation. I notified MCPS and the Board of Education at the time, and I have submitted documentation of this incident with my testimony.

This is not a hypothetical risk. It is not a burst pipe or a fallen tree. It is a daily hazard that persists largely because it does not fit neatly into existing funding categories. As a licensed architect and a mother of two children in that building, I want to be clear: **continued delay is not acceptable.**

This condition stems from legacy planning decisions and was compounded when the building was converted to a middle school without fully addressing known design flaws. Today, the building requires urgent investment not only to address Stairwell 7, but also critical HVAC failures and other long-neglected safety and infrastructure needs. In the absence of timely information and accurate cost estimates from MCPS, the school

community has requested approximately sixty million dollars to address the full scope of deficiencies. That figure reflects decades of deferred maintenance—not the cost of correcting individual hazards. The cost to remediate Stairwell 7 would be a small fraction of that total and is precisely the type of discrete life-safety issue that should be addressed immediately, rather than bundled into a multi-year capital effort. I urge the county and MCPS to address Stairwell 7 and immediate mold and HVAC issues to keep our staff and students safe in FY 2027-28.

The same structural failure exists with HVAC and indoor air quality issues across the MCPS portfolio. At SSIMS, staff have reported health concerns related to indoor air quality, and black mold has been observed in multiple areas of the building. Even basic health measures—such as replacing a heavily used band room rug—have been delayed indefinitely while we are told to wait for PLAR funds, with no clear timeline, transparency, or accountability. A six-year CIP cycle is simply too long when health and safety are at stake.

This is not the failure of one school or one administrator. It is a systemic problem.

If the County cannot fully fund the CIP—and we all acknowledge that it cannot—then fiscal prudence requires a clearly defined contingency mechanism for urgent, non-catastrophic facility failures: life-safety hazards, ADA compliance needs, HVAC breakdowns, and indoor air quality risks that cannot wait for the next capital cycle. Without such a mechanism, delay becomes normalized. And delay is not fiscal restraint—it is cost shifting. Deferred safety issues become more expensive, more disruptive, and expose the County to greater long-term risk.

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### **Transparency, Data, and Accountability**

Data should inform decisions, but we must also acknowledge its limits. I appreciate Dr. Taylor's emphasis on data-driven decision-making; however, data is only useful when it is accurate, complete, and contextualized. Our experience at SSIMS demonstrated that significant capital investments, undertaken without sufficient engagement from educators and administrators or a comprehensive understanding of building function and student movement, failed to resolve core operational and safety issues.

MCPS should codify a framework for capital planning that includes systemwide analysis of existing conditions, clearly articulated project goals, and meaningful input from school leaders, educators, and staff. Consistent processes and surveys across the system will lead to better-defined projects and better outcomes.

The Facility Condition Index is an important step toward transparency—but only if the data is accurate and actively maintained. Initial FCI reports for SSIMS and Sligo Creek Elementary contained significant errors. MCPS must meaningfully engage school administrators and building services staff and hold consultants accountable for accuracy, particularly given the substantial public funds spent generating this data. Major capital decisions should not proceed without accurate condition data, completed boundary studies, and input from those who understand how buildings are actually used and how students move through them.

Transparency matters in other ways as well. Furniture, fixture, and equipment replacement schedules should be accessible and clear. It should not be a mystery how old a rug is, what its expected lifespan is, or when it is scheduled for replacement. When information is unclear or withheld, trust erodes and risk increases.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of ensuring that capital investments reach communities across the county that have been underserved for decades. I appreciate Dr. Taylor's stated goal of supporting Silver Spring middle school students as a whole, but I hope that deeper community input, better data, and more deliberate planning may lead to decisions that produce truly successful, diverse, and community-centered schools throughout Silver Spring.

Fiscal responsibility is not just about how much we spend. It is about whether our systems allow us to act when health and safety are at stake—and whether known risks are addressed before they become crises.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Addendum: SSIMS PTSA letter to MCPS re: Stairwell 7 Incident December 2026

January 7, 2026

Dear Dr. Taylor and Ms. Swiatocha,

I am writing in my capacity as PTSA President at Silver Spring International Middle School, as a Registered Architect, and, most importantly, as a parent. In previous correspondence, I have raised serious concerns regarding the life-safety conditions of the SSIMS building, particularly the longstanding hazards associated with Stairwell 7. Today, I must formally and urgently request immediate attention, funding, and a comprehensive professional review of the building's egress systems. These conditions present unacceptable and well-documented risks that MCPS has been aware of for years without implementing corrective action.

### **1. Immediate Hazard: Documented Congestion & Unsafe Occupant Behavior**

On Thursday, December 11, 2025, a dangerous congestion event occurred on Stairwell 7 during a routine class transition. Sixth graders leaving the cafeteria without special instruction, training, or supervision (as required by the IBC Chapter 10) attempted to reach classrooms in the historic wing at the rear of the building. As additional students entered the same route, simultaneous two-directional travel created severe bottlenecks at both the first- and second-floor entry points.

On the second floor, the 12-foot wide corridor splits into a down/up ramp, leading to a 36-inch offset doorway. This small entry leads to a landing where students arrive from both the first and third floors, creating a massive choke point. On the first floor, the stairwell's inboard placement narrows the corridor to approximately six feet, restricting movement in and out of the historic wing. **Students were pushed, tripped, stepped on, compressed, and shouting, creating escalating panic.** Security staff present were **unable to manage the volume or stabilize the situation.**

Although no serious injuries were reported, multiple students required a visit to the nurse. This occurred under normal daylight conditions, without smoke, darkness, fire, loss of power, or an active threat. Under true emergency conditions, the outcome could have been catastrophic.

As a licensed architect, I am ethically bound to consider the same scenario layered with smoke, panic, reduced visibility, fire behavior, or an active shooter—conditions in which children do *not* behave in a controlled or trained fashion. Recent tragedies, such as the Crans-Montana nightclub fire over the New Year's holiday, reinforce how quickly chaos and immaturity can turn into disaster for young occupants.

### **2. Code Compliance Deficiencies**

The International Building Code states clearly that **means of egress must function without special knowledge, training, or controlled behavior.** SSIMS' egress system, as currently configured and operated, does not meet this requirement. Currently, students movements are controlled with one-way traffic, security and staff monitoring, and teacher-led evacuation drills.

- During an April 2024 fire drill, I observed students led single-file by teachers and exiting through the fire door into the historic wing of the building, despite the posted egress plan showing Stairwell 7 as part of a protected fire compartment requiring mid-corridor discharge (Exhibit B). My own students reported that this is still the method of egress as of today's fire drill (1/7/2026).
- SSIMS PTSA requested the full life safety drawings for the building, which cite **BOCA 1995 and NFPA 101-94** (Exhibit A), yet actual building usage during drills deviates even from these outdated plans.
- Code is explicit: **once occupants enter an egress stair enclosure, they are to remain in that protected pathway until reaching the exit discharge.** Current training and practice violate this fundamental requirement.

- Further, there is no area of refuge provided in this location. Handicapped occupants utilizing ramps in the corridor between building wings do not have sufficient space to rest in the fire compartment. At minimum, the fire compartment should be expanded at the second floor to allow for safe refuge.
- The split ramps at the second floor do not reflect the building occupancy and logical egress. The downward ramp services occupants who ramp down from the third floor and the opposing building wing's second floor to a single door within a 4' hallway. This leads to a significant bottle neck and is unsafe. The egress from all directions must be studied to allow sufficient space for the current occupancy.

MCPS's reliance on choreographed teacher-led fire drills to demonstrate "compliance" does not meet the intent of the code and does not represent actual behavior during a life-threatening event.

### 3. Longstanding Awareness & Lack of Funding / Dangerous Holding School

For years, the SSIMS community has been told that fixing Stairwell 7 is cost-prohibitive or "impossible to solve". The current CIP again provides **no allocation** to correct this hazardous condition. The proposal to close SSIMS for use as a future holding school **increases** the danger, as new populations of students and staff would continually need to be retrained to navigate an inherently unsafe egress system.

This raises critical operational questions:

- Who will provide ongoing, consistent training?
- How will new administrators understand the building's fragile circulation patterns and the risk points of peak-period movement?
- How will untrained students evacuate safely during an emergency on their first days in the building?

This approach compounds life-safety risk and exposes MCPS to significant liability.

### 4. Deficiencies in the November 2024 Feasibility Study

SSIMS PTSA was provided the November 2024 feasibility study to address the issues with Stairwell 7 (See Exhibit C). This feasibility study proposing relocation of the stair into the historic wing appears incomplete and impractical:

- It does not include a **full-building egress analysis**.
- It fails to consider **compartmentalization and student flow**.
- It proposes modifications that would impact historic building elements, previously cited as non-starters
- Appears to be an unnecessarily expensive and complicated solution.

Based on available information, the study does not present a realistic or comprehensive path toward remediation.

### 5. Potential Solutions

I have provided conceptual sketches illustrating two possible approaches to resolving the first-floor corridor constriction and the second-floor single-door bottleneck. These sketches are not design solutions; they simply demonstrate that feasible, cost-effective interventions exist and could be implemented over a summer break. (EXHIBIT D)

Given the severity of the hazard, I formally request:

1. **Immediate allocation of funding** to correct the life-safety deficiencies of Stairwell 7.
2. A **comprehensive egress and life-safety review** conducted jointly by:
  - A Registered Architect

- The Fire Marshal
  - The MCPS Safety Coordinator
  - SSIMS Administration
3. Short-term mitigation measures to protect students now.
  4. Integration of Stairwell 7 remediation into the CIP as an urgent priority.

## **6. Duty of Care and Liability**

During our May 2024 meeting with MCPS Facilities, I emphasized that any serious injury or life-safety incident involving Stairwell 7 would constitute foreseeable and preventable harm. It remains my professional opinion that continued inaction represents **gross negligence**. At minimum, our schools must be safe environments capable of moving children through the building without placing them at risk.

I look forward to your immediate and substantive response to this matter.

Sincerely,

**Megan DiNicola, RA**

SSIMS PTSA

Mother of 3 MCPS Students

Attachments:

*Exhibit A: 1999 Life Safety Plans*

*Exhibit B: Life Safety Plan Showing current egress path*

*Exhibit C: Stair #7 Feasibility Study, Dated November 2024*

*Exhibit D: Egress Solution Concepts*