

Dear Chairperson Dittmar and Members of the Board of Supervisors:

For more than a year, our Board has had increasingly urgent discussions around the issues of quality and fairness in our schools; issues about which I know each of you deeply care. This urgency results from nearly ten years of not being able to fully fund our capital requirements even though student enrollments have continued to push those requirements higher each year.

In-depth data, analysis and recommendations by two citizen committees—our Long-Range Planning Advisory Committee and the Redistricting Advisory Committee--makes it clear that Albemarle County is running out of space for students and that concomitantly, there is a widening gap in the learning opportunities our county provides to its students.

The majority of our schools were built well before the turn of the century, designed to prepare students for a world economy that no longer exists, to equip them with skills that no longer are adequate and to provide them with an education circumscribed by outdated structures and rigid instructional models.

More Trailers at More Schools

Today, as our Board deliberates over how best to accommodate our county's continued growth, among the options we are forced to consider is adding trailers at Greer Elementary School. If we take no further actions to address the impact of more students entering our school division, the prospect of more trailers at more schools is a real one.

So will be the need to turn more closets into teacher workspaces, to expand the size of our classes, to channel students down congested hallways and to confine students for extended periods of time to classrooms without natural light. Thousands of students will continue to rely upon science labs and libraries that were current when Ronald Reagan was President of the United States while others, because of where they reside, will benefit from science labs and media centers that offer the latest resources for learning.

Nowhere are the disparities in educational services more evident than at Red Hill Elementary School, which is among the capital improvement project sites that continue to be unfunded. Children at Red Hill study art and music in a trailer and they use a library that is 60 percent undersized.

This is unfair and a disservice to the large majorities of residents who, in the county's community surveys, said quality education is at the top of the list of services that local government must provide. It would represent the unwise and inadequate application of 20th century ideas to meet 21st century challenges. It would limit the future of our children.

Vital Projects not Funded

The current capital improvement program does not fund such vital projects as the addition of 16 classrooms at Woodbrook Elementary School to provide urban ring students with adequate learning space; an addition at Albemarle High School to address enrollment growth from northern development areas; the modernization of antiquated science labs, media centers and classrooms or the addition of science labs for our Environmental Studies Academy.

These priorities alone total over \$70 million over the next five years, a figure highly unlikely to be available in the current capital improvement funding profile, despite their necessity.

It is an uncertainty eloquently expressed by the Redistricting Advisory Committee in their final report: *The committee would like to go on the record, however, with their general dissatisfaction of what seems to be a broken process in that redistricting is a painful solution to what should be solved by building additional school capacities. They would like to see a more proactive approach when it comes to long range planning in the County. There is a general sentiment in the community that we embark on redistricting studies far too often. The impact on schools of new development and changing community demographics needs to be better quantified and addressed within the capital improvement program.*

The wisdom of this view is being played out in real time. Both Hollymead and Baker-Butler Elementary Schools, which were the subject of redistricting actions just a few years ago, soon will be at capacity again. This was instructive for our Board in determining how best to resolve the current overcapacity challenge at Albemarle High School. The school has more than 100 students than it should have and in a few years will be more than 200 students beyond capacity. Lunch periods now begin barely an hour-and-a-half into the seven-hour school day. Parking is inadequate for staff and students.

Solving One Problem by Creating Another

Our Board recently voted not to redistrict Albemarle students to Monticello High School because that would not address the underlying problem—there are not enough high school seats in our schools to accommodate the current and projected number of high school students in our division. As the Hollymead and Baker-Butler experiences demonstrate, moving students from Albemarle to Monticello only ensures that in future years, we will have capacity issues at both schools.

It is insensitive and illogical to disrupt hundreds of students and their families by moving them from one school to another to achieve a solution that is short-lived at best. We need to find the best way to add seats where the students are and in this case, that means building an addition to Albemarle High School.

Bond Referendum a Pathway to Ending Disparity

Our Boards have expressed interest in alternative funding methods to meet our obligations to the residents of our county, including the possibility of a bond referendum. Referendums have been utilized across the Commonwealth and our country for many years to expand public participation in decisions that have significant long-term consequence.

If a referendum were placed on the ballot in Albemarle County in 2016 and approved by voters, it could lead to the completion of the school division's most important projects by the 2019-2020 school year, ending the disparity in educational opportunities for all of our families. Referenda have been utilized across the Commonwealth for many years to expand public participation in decisions that have significant long-term consequence.

We recognize referenda do not create revenues but they empower governing bodies to make difficult decisions about taxes and priorities. A referendum would encourage public awareness and discussion around the future quality of life in our county. In the ultimate demonstration of our democratic system, it would enable those most affected—the taxpayers of our county, a direct voice in how their money is best invested in their future.

Now is the time for our two Boards to have a bottom-line discussion about ending the uncertainty our families face over the quality of educational opportunities in our county; about a way forward that would eliminate the disparities that now exist in Albemarle County classrooms.

Respectfully, the members of the Albemarle County School Board request a joint meeting as soon as possible to engage in a thoughtful and evidence-based discussion of a school division bond referendum being placed before the voters in 2016.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ned Gallaway
Chair
Albemarle County School Board