

Kadera: Comments on the CIP Direction Amendment 12/14/23

Two years ago, I voted for a CIP that recommended APS take the next steps to advance the idea of MPSA moving into the legacy Career Center building. I supported this recommendation based on the information that was available to me at the time.

Capital Improvement Plans are updated every two years, and each time we go through this process we are careful to say that subsequent CIPs may change projects as we have updated information.

This CIP cycle is no exception, and new information available to us requires, in my opinion, that we reevaluate previous assumptions and positions. Here is what I know today that is different from two years ago:

First, we have enrollment projections that forecast a surplus of more than 1,000 elementary school seats across our county. For me, this begs the question of whether in this CIP we need to spend our capital dollars to create additional elementary school environments, through new construction or by repurposing structures that are not currently elementary schools.

Second, we've now completed a comprehensive Facilities Condition Assessment, which confirms that we have many schools in need of major infrastructure replacement or major renovation. For a decade or more, we focused on building new schools and adding seats because our student population was growing. We recognized that there would come a time—and that time is now—when we would be able to turn our attention to our *existing* school buildings and focus our capital dollars there. Those dollars are limited. If we want to make real inroads into our infrastructure and renovation projects—including for our Title I schools in the queue, it requires that we spend our money as strategically as possible.

Third, two years ago we weren't talking about swing space. We won't know if any of our major renovation projects will require swing space until we complete the feasibility studies that are part of this CIP. I know our recent experience with the Nottingham recommendation has left many of us feeling somewhat reluctant to even bring up the subject. But this summer I learned that utilizing swing space, even for a project where the work could be done in phases, can cut project time by as much as half, which translates into cost savings. I don't think swing space should come off the table. *If* it doesn't, then we have to be thinking about where we would locate it. In an ideal world, this would be in an APS-owned building that is standing empty, can handle bus traffic, and is centrally located.

And finally, I learned last June in the Pre-CIP report that it's very likely that repurposing the legacy Career Center building for MPSA will cost \$39-45 million dollars, not the \$15m that was discussed as a reasonable placeholder amount two years ago. More recently, I have heard it could be done for less than \$40 million. We simply don't know at this point, and so I *do* understand and agree with the language in the amendment that directs staff to study what could be done at different price points.

But here is the piece I think is missing: if we are going to be careful stewards of our limited capital funds and plan in a long-term way, we have to ask staff to study an additional scenario—one that would relocate MPSA to another site, taking advantage of our excess elementary capacity, and exploring whether and how we could use the legacy Career Center building for swing space or for instructional opportunities more closely aligned to the Career Center programs. We could still honor the commitments made to the surrounding neighborhoods related to number of buildings and green space. Would this option net out to be less expensive? We don't know—but we should do that homework.

After that exercise is completed, it may very well demonstrate that the best possible option is to house MPSA in the legacy building. I am not arguing *against* that scenario—I am simply arguing that we owe it to the community to recognize our changing needs and circumstances and study the alternative. No one is going to move anywhere before our next CIP cycle—we know that for a fact. We have the time to do this homework.

There are two arguments I've heard against studying any scenario that relocates MPSA to a different site. First, I have heard that even the *possibility* that this could happen is unsettling to members of that school community. To MPSA: I fully appreciate that nobody wants to live with that kind of uncertainty, and I definitely don't think we should inflict it needlessly. I also suggest that actually, *none* of us with students enrolled in APS exist in absolute certainty that our children will go to school at a certain site. Through boundary processes and option program moves, any of us, including my kids, could be rezoned to another school. When this happens, I want a clear rationale, solid data, and equitable treatment—but as a parent I accept it as a necessary part of operating a school system.

I have also heard that moving MPSA will be damaging because it serves a diverse population that may not be able to access the program if it moves to another part of the county. I will note that APS has moved option and alternative programs before, including in 2020 two elementary option programs whose student bodies are more diverse than that of MPSA. Arlington Community High School, which enrolls one of our *most* diverse student populations, has been moved multiple times and is due to move twice more because it could not remain in the Fenwick Building next to the Career Center. If we are operating by an algorithm that says we will not displace our most diverse student populations, then we need to employ that algorithm consistently.

Nonetheless, I take this concern about access quite seriously, and consequently last summer I asked for historical and current enrollment data for all of our option programs. When I look at enrollment patterns for our option programs that have moved over the past five years—Montessori out of Drew, ATS, and Escuela Key—I don't see any conclusive evidence that families in specific zip codes or zoned to our neighborhood schools furthest south are unable or unwilling to access option programs—even when they're moved further away.

I say all of this to explain my vote, which I know will not be popular in certain circles, but which I genuinely believe is the most responsible course of action. Without an additional comparative scenario to study for the future of the Career Center campus, I really worry that our planning will be incomplete and short-sighted.