

Pandemic brings challenges to HCPSS

By **George Berkheimer**
Senior Writer

It's a tough time for public school administrators and board members.

They are dealing with pandemic restrictions, a virtual education model, increasing budget uncertainties and now the threat of cybersecurity attacks.

Michael Martirano, superintendent of the Howard County Public School – p System (HCPSS), said administrators expect to re-implement and expand small group opportunities while preparing for a larger-scale return to schools, either in a hybrid or fully in-person return, after the COVID vaccine becomes more widespread.

“We know there is going to be a significant learning slide for all students,” he said. “Our students are going to require some level of recovery of learning supports before they are able to fully engage in their next level of learning.”

HCPSS is preparing summer recovery offerings for more students than it has ever served and will be implementing additional support for all students in the 2021-2022 school year.

“Other academic programs will continue to be required and likely enhanced, including special education services, career and technology education, dual enrollment and additional instructional supports for courses at all levels,” Martirano said.

New Board

Chao Wu, chair of Howard County's Board of Education, said the school system will begin any transition by first focusing on the tools it has available.

After that, “the school system can bring in and pilot some innovative out-of-the-box solutions to some problems we are facing now and examine the result,” he said. “We may take a new education model for some programs, for example, using a digital learning model, based on our pilot program's result.”

The HCPSS board will begin this task with a few new members.

In November, voters returned incumbent board members Christine Delmont-Small and Jen Mallo and selected newcomers Antonia Watts, Jolene Mosley and Yun Lu to accompany them. The terms of Wu and Vicky Cutroneo, the remaining board member, do not expire until 2022.

Individual board members contacted for comment for this article declined to respond, deferring to the board chair.

Budget Impact

Wu said county and state revenue for the school system has been lagging proportionally, resulting in increasing class sizes and occasional program cuts to balance the budget.

The school system weathered an immediate need for tens of thousands of Chromebooks, hundreds of Wi-Fi hotspots and other hardware and software needs to ensure a virtual solution.

“My greatest fiscal concern at this point is the impact that decreased enrollment may have on next year's per pupil funding formulas,” Martirano said.

HCPSS's 2020-2021 K-12 enrollment is 1,229 below last year's enrollment and 1,863 below this year's projections.

Based on those numbers, “HCPSS revenues from the state and county could decline by more than \$32 million in fiscal 2022 if no actions are taken by the state,” Martirano said.

Cyber Risk

The emerging cybersecurity threats that exploits a growing dependence on remote access is impacting schools.

In November, a ransomware attack shut down the Baltimore County Public Schools system for several days, clearly illustrating the new vulnerability.

According to Xavier Salinas, vice president of Threat Operations for Blackpoint Cybersecurity in Ellicott City, previous ransomware attacks tended to target medical providers who were more likely to pay to avoid HIPAA compliance and patient safety issues.

“Now we see [hackers] going into school systems and municipal cities as well,” he said, partly because the change to remote access happened so quickly and few schools had security experts to help guide them. “They opened up gaps in their networks, that's where the risk comes from.”

Wu said he is “comfortable” with HCPSS's precautions and approach to cybersecurity, citing the board's recent approval of a new contract focusing on IT security.

“[Cybersecurity] is an integral part of our education infrastructure and we need continuous and proactive investment in it,” he said.

Martirano said, “Since joining HCPSS in May 2017, I prioritized improving our information security system, including investing critically needed funds to upgrade hardware equipment, moving storage and processing to cloud-based systems, putting security protocols in place to ensure a higher level of authentication and adding staff to oversee information security.”

As administrators and staff navigate these new dynamics of education, the focus remains on the students.

“We know that the wellbeing of our students is being impacted by this pandemic – some significantly,” Martirano said. “I commend students and families who have done their part to remain home and prevent the spread of the virus but I also acknowledge that the increased isolation and lack of involvement in social activities is something we are going to have to account for when students return.”

HOCO BY WHOSE DESIGN?

A Howard County planning tool called “The General Plan” is updated every ten years. The plan has huge effects on county resources and development rules.

Much change is about to occur. Giving input to the plan is important.

So far, a lot of ideas have been put forth by the development sector, the Housing Opportunities Task Force and county consultants.

More diverse viewpoints are needed and there are opportunities to act.

It is worth the time to go to HoCoByDesign.com and see the county plans.

Addressing the County Council is always a good idea in this long update process as changes will require council approval. You can reach the entire council via email at CouncilMail@howardcountymd.gov.

The task force and county consultants will heavily guide new zoning in the updated plan.

Proposed changes include more suburban rentals and duplexes, expanding public sewer and water westward, increasing new homes, reducing development fees and taxes, streamlining project approval and reducing restrictions in the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO), a set of rules that restrict development temporarily, in overcapacity school districts.

Supposedly, the proposed changes are meant to address a shortage of affordable housing (AH).

Does increasing development really provide much more AH?

A large amount of development is in the pipeline, even without increasing incentives to provide more AH, much of which will concentrate low income units.

Many believe that we need to spread out AH to create diverse neighborhoods and, in turn, diverse neighborhood schools.

High density development at any cost to get tiny amounts of AH is a bad goal. Increasing AH could happen faster and cheaper if we stopped giving millions of dollars to projects for doing little more than required and either eliminate or greatly raise the fees available to developers to not provide AH.

Overpopulating to get small amounts of AH will overwhelm schools, roads, health and safety services.

Also, because AH is exempt from APFO school waits,



MY TURN
Lisa Markovitz

reducing APFO restrictions will actually remove the incentive to provide AH.

Does APFO really slow development?

A misleading map of the county with areas noted in red has been publicized and referred to as a “moratorium” on development due to recent implementation of long-sought APFO changes.

Why is it misleading? The expected county processing time for development plans is three years, which mostly run concurrent with the wait times in APFO, which is maxed at four years. Thus, the notion that APFO stops building is completely false.

Anyone who claims that development is dipping and needs to be incentivized, made cheaper to provide, and with less restriction is not looking at the constant pipeline of projects, currently with thousands of units coming.

Montgomery County recently ended a building moratorium and reduced some development fees to increase growth. Should Howard follow suit?

It is important to keep in mind that Montgomery County had the highest development fees in the state for a very long time; ten times higher than Howard's, which were among the lowest for decades. A long overdue increase in those fees only recently occurred.

Not everyone wants to live in an urban center, especially as we see pandemic recovery.

For years, many fought hard for stronger planning regulations, which were only recently implemented. Now is not the time to go backwards.

Lisa Markovitz, MSE, is president of the Maryland civic/political group, The People's Voice.

YOUR TURN

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