

Renovations Near for Aging Community Centers

\$320,000 Requested, And More Considered

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As a pastor, Pearl Selby knows the seven deadly sins. And she knew that one of them, envy, was trying to get her attention during a recent tour of the Fairland community center in [Burtonsville](#), one of [Montgomery County](#)'s newest recreational facilities.



The Scotland Community Center off Seven Locks Road in Potomac is one of eight deemed most in need of renovation

"It all makes my eyes pop out," Selby said, standing outside the huge, well-lighted gym, where a boys' basketball game moved up and down the gleaming wood floor. A moment later, she surveyed the comfortable chairs, card tables and piano of the senior center, and then the small forest of new fitness machines that stood under a wall-mounted television.

"This is like night and day to Ross Boddy [Center]," said Selby, referring to her community's aging county facility less than eight miles away in Sandy Spring.

For a gym, Ross Boddy, a converted postwar elementary school, makes do with a portable set of hoops set up in a small multipurpose room. Whereas Fairland, built in 2004, still brims with new-car smell and state-of-the-art equipment, Selby said, Ross Boddy has leaky windows and bathrooms that are essentially unchanged from when she used them in the 1950s, as a student.

"Even a small replica of this would be great; we're not greedy," said Selby, pastor of Oak Grove AME Zion Church and part of a long campaign to secure upgrades for some of the county's oldest and smallest recreation centers, mostly ones that serve lower-income minority neighborhoods. "These communities have been fighting for over a dozen years to get improvements in their community centers."

Those efforts may be paying off. County Executive [Isiah Leggett](#) (D), after pledging during last year's campaign to fix the aging facilities, inserted \$320,000 in emergency spending for some community and senior centers in his 2008 budget proposal. Those funds, if approved by the County Council in the final budget, would be available within weeks to upgrade old restrooms and replace worn-out gear, and Leggett said he plans to seek more substantial renovations, including possibly rebuilding some centers.

"I think it's something that's long, long overdue," Leggett said in an interview. "Given the state of these centers, in order to reasonably address this, it's going to be a major capital budget item."

Leggett was not prepared to estimate how much he will request for community center rehabilitation later this year as part of the county's five-year capital improvement plan. Nor would he identify what kind of upgrade each facility is likely to get.

"We're just at the beginning of the process of working that out," Leggett said. "But it is a priority."

County officials have identified eight facilities that are most in need of attention, including the three that Selby's group has been campaigning for: Ross Boddy, the Good Hope Neighborhood Recreation Center in [Silver Spring](#) and the [Scotland](#) Neighborhood Recreation Center in [Potomac](#). As architects and engineers assess their condition, the county's Department of Recreation is having public meetings at each of them to determine what residents see lacking.

"It's been awhile since we conducted this kind of listening campaign," said Gabriel Albornoz, director of the Recreation Department.

His team also planned meetings at the Clara Barton Neighborhood Recreation Center in [Cabin John](#), the Plum Gar center in [Germantown](#), the Bauer Drive Community Center in [Rockville](#), the Upper County Neighborhood Recreation Center in [Gaithersburg](#) and the Schweinhaut Senior Center in Silver Spring.

"These places are critical to neighborhood life," Albornoz said, citing research that indicates more than 70 percent of county schoolchildren come from households in which both parents are working. "We're committed to reaching out to communities that feel they've been underserved."

Bette Thompson, a neighborhood activist who lives across the street from the Scotland Community Center, said the attention from county officials has been a long time coming.

Since 1994, she has been pushing for improvements at the facility, which provides some of the only after-school opportunities in Scotland, a largely African American enclave of Potomac. The center, squeezed between condominium buildings, suffers flooding during heavy rain, and its only gym is in a metal building lined with padding to keep basketball players from slamming into the walls.

"It's too small for anything other than three-on-three," Thompson said. "Otherwise, they're just standing out on the street."

Thompson said the neighborhood's efforts to have the center renovated have looked bright in the past, only to go nowhere. She even made a lobbying trip to [Annapolis](#) several years ago in a fruitless search for state funds.

This time, she said, she is more optimistic.

"I feel like shouting," she said. "We thought we were fighting a losing battle."

But other activists said the battle isn't won quite yet.

"The money has been promised before but hasn't materialized," said Cynthia Marshall of Action in [Montgomery](#), a social advocacy group that is coordinating the efforts of Selby's and other churches on behalf of their neighborhood centers. With shortfalls projected in county budgets, getting significant money for the recreation centers into the capital improvement plan is going to be a challenge, Marshall said.

"That's where the real fight is going to be," she said. "We're not giving up this campaign."