

Inequality Is Evident With Flip of a Switch

washingtonpost.com

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/19/AR2008041901744.html>

By Marc Fisher
Sunday, April 20, 2008; C01

Just as Candy Binson Smith was telling me about life without indoor plumbing or electricity in the 1960s in Scotland, the tiny black neighborhood tucked away along a dead-end street in affluent Potomac, the lights in the gymnasium next to us flickered and died.

Eight boys who had been playing hoops on the too-small court under a leaky roof slowly left the pitch-black gym, dropping the basketball and wandering outside to hang out in the street. The gym went dark as if to illustrate exactly what Smith and several other lifelong Scotlandites had been telling me about: the sad neglect [Montgomery County](#) has shown this and other community centers in the county's black neighborhoods.

Montgomery's 18 recreation centers include spectacular, modern facilities such as the one three miles away in the affluent part of Potomac. But conditions are grim at this decrepit, leaky building in Potomac's unseen back lot.

Many blacks in the county, Maryland's most affluent, wonder why evidence of official neglect pops up primarily at centers in places such as Scotland and the black sections of Sandy Spring and Silver Spring. Montgomery's population is 17 percent black, according to the census.

Led by organizers from the faith-based advocacy group Action in Montgomery, students, parents and church leaders are pushing to get the centers renovated pronto, and the County Council is now offering early support. The county acknowledges that conditions have deteriorated at some centers, but officials say the sliding economy makes it hard to launch projects right now.

Scotland's center has no full-time director, no weekend hours, no place for kids to hang out after school, none of the spiffier amenities available down the road where the rich people live.

While Olney and South Germantown sport spacious, well-equipped centers with extensive programs -- and while the county has set aside millions to build centers in North Bethesda and North Potomac -- at Scotland's center, all four of the computer printers that kids use to do homework are dead. Neighborhood youngsters must use the building in shifts; teens literally wait out on the street for three hours at a stretch while the little kids are inside getting tutoring or after-school care.

Those who grew up in Scotland, where until the 1960s residents had to get water by carrying buckets to a nearby spring, gave up their houses and land in exchange for the county coming in to build a housing development where many of the settlement's original families still reside. "Growing up, it wasn't like I was ashamed, but we knew it was different here," Smith says. At school in the 1950s and early '60s, "I knew I was different because my clothes smelled like kerosene," which Scotland families burned for heat and light.

Smith and others moved away while Scotland was being rebuilt; they returned to see that their one road had been paved, and county services extended into the neighborhood, just off Seven Locks Road between Democracy Boulevard and Tuckerman Lane. The community center was the county's expression of regret for the many years in which Scotland was wholly ignored, residents say.

"Finally, we had a place to go," Odelia Dove Cooper recalls. "We used it for dances and church events, bingo, game night, [Weight Watchers](#) classes."

Today, although the Potomac center is open 76 hours a week and is fully staffed and stocked with summer camps and programs for seniors, kids and others, Scotland's center is open only 45 hours a week. Kids are bused to Potomac for many activities.

"We can't bring our friends here," says Aida Sow, a senior at Churchill High. "They make the high school kids leave the building every day from 3 to 6 while the little kids use it. So all we can do is hang out outside, and everybody looks at us and thinks we're doing something illegal."

"It's a pattern," says Deborah Martins, 16, a junior at Sherwood High who has been rallying fellow students to lobby the county to fix up the Ross Boddy center in Sandy Spring. "In the more predominantly African American neighborhoods, they're just not up to par with the centers in more affluent communities."

Some residents of a new subdivision near Ross Boddy where houses go for \$900,000 have wandered by to check out the center, says Janay White, another Sherwood junior. "The new people come and take a look and they don't come back," White says. "It's not a race issue. Our center just doesn't suit their needs."

After County Executive [Isiah Leggett](#), facing a budget deficit of more than \$300 million, recommended delaying the renovation of the centers, hundreds of supporters gathered this month to press the County Council for a quicker fix. When Council member [Roger Berliner](#) of Potomac proposed to set aside \$17 million to rebuild the neglected centers, a majority embraced the idea. The plan awaits final approval May 15.

The irony here, of course, is that those with the greatest needs get the least, while those whose means grant them plenty of alternatives -- private sports clubs and the like -- get the best public facilities as well. This is the opposite of the approach in the District, which is nobody's idea of a recreation center paradise, but still: The city has put its

newest, best-outfitted recreation centers in poorer parts of town, while affluent neighborhoods go entirely without publicly-supported facilities.

That's hardly a good solution either, but you'd think a wealthy community such as Montgomery could find a way to keep the lights on where they are most needed.

E-mail: marcfisher@washpost.com.