

When planning for Lafayette began in 1928, one of the community goals was to close the old neighborhood school on Connecticut Avenue (where the current Chevy Chase Library is located) and place the new one further into the neighborhood on a much larger site with the attached park. So three years later the north wing of the building opened, with the south wing and the center of the school being completed over the following 5 years. Later the early childhood wing and cafeteria were added to finally get the building we have now.

I'm also pretty sure that when all these discussions were taking place, getting to school was rarely mentioned. When I was growing up, most families still only had one car. We walked to school and went home each day for lunch and to watch Bozo's Big Top on TV. When you visit schools built during the same time frame as Lafayette, most don't have a cafeteria. Students went home for lunch until the early 70's when more women entered the workforce. Many DC schools still eat lunch in classrooms, with cafeterias being added only when schools finally get renovated. Students used to ride their bikes to Lafayette or just walked like I did.

Now it is a completely different story and a completely different problem. Most families have multiple vehicles, and most families have more than one wage earner. So now we have one of the biggest traffic jams in Washington right here on Broad Branch Road. We are on a Metro bus route, we have buses dropping off students at the school, and we have parents trying to get to work and deliver their children to school as close to simultaneously as possible.

Last Friday was particularly challenging. Both first grade and kindergarten were leaving for field trips that day. Seven buses were needed to transport all the students. They were trying to park in front of the school. And there, in the clearly marked no parking zones, were cars left by parents who were walking their children up to the school building. Cars that sat parked for over 20 minutes. Cars that blocked the center of the street playing chicken with the Metro bus. I watched a non school person park in the handicapped area and walk across to the market and get coffee and something to eat. Some people did just drive up and drop off their children. But many parked and left their cars for more than 15 minutes.

This fall we conducted a Safe Routes to School survey and spent some time reviewing what the traffic conditions are around the school in the morning and afternoon. In short, it's pretty terrible. Northampton Street is gridlocked, with Broad Branch no better. Parking right in front of the school is illegal, yet every day people park there even though there are legal spots within a one block walk of the school. Cars circle and circle looking for how close they can get to the front of the school. And with a still growing school population, it can only get worse.

Over the next few weeks you will be hearing more about this from me and the Safe Schools committee. Why? Because after Memorial Day we would like to pilot a drop-off program here at Lafayette to see if we can alleviate some of our own traffic issues. Some voluntary one way streets. Some adults helping with getting kids out of cars and on their way. As you come to Arts Night (either one) we will have more information available and some maps for you to look at. Then as the school year winds down, we will evaluate how things went and what we want to put in place for the fall.

I hope we can work together to solve some of these traffic issues at Lafayette. Right now we have the opportunity to work together as a school without involving outsiders. But Metro is certainly aware of the trouble that is occurring on the E6 route in the morning, and the DC police have also been notified about the illegal parking and they will ticket if they see cars in front of the school. The best news is that so far no one has been hurt, but I do see the frustration of many people who are caught in the crowd and how they can hit that gas pedal when they see a little break in the line. I think we have just been lucky.

So watch the Tuesday Bulletin for more information, and take a look at the Safe Schools information that will soon be available at the school. Consider parking a little way from the school and walking instead of leaving your car for 20 minutes in the no parking zone. For older students, this summer may be a good time to learn how to ride a bike to school. You may want to consider using 33rd Street for drop off. All possible ways for us to learn new ways to get to a school that is tucked into a lovely park setting. I'm sure traffic was not on the school founders' minds. It is on mine and so many others. We will figure out how to get a better handle on gridlock at Lafayette. It will just take some learning of new behaviors.