



Help Save Our Parks Coalition Working Again to Protect Park Space

Parks are great places to play in Montgomery County. But when it comes to our school system targeting parkland for school construction, residents around the parks **don't play**. They mobilize to protect their local green space.

The *Help Save Our Park* Coalition held a public meeting on January 29 at the Coffield Community Center to provide information to the community about the on-going (second) site selection process for Middle School #2 in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster. This site selection has been problematic due to the lack of available space for the new school and targeting of parkland as candidate sites by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). Although it was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, about 50 residents attended for an update on the latest site selection process. Also attending were Gabriel Albornoz, Director of Recreation, Mike Riley, Deputy Director of Parks, William Crane, manager of the Forest Glen Garrison, and Casey Anderson, Commissioner from the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC).

Resident Roger Paden explained why a new site selection is taking place. Following the selection of Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Local Park by the first Site Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC), Planning Board Chair Francoise Carrier wrote a letter explaining that park land is not available to MCPS. The Board of Education subsequently voted last April to use Rock Creek Hills Local Park as the alternative site. As this park had once housed a school, MCPS retained the legal right to claim the land for educational use. However, the Rock Creek Hills Homeowners Association immediately raised

three objections. First, they filed complaints about violations of the Open Meetings Act. They raised other procedural complaints and also questioned whether the use of Program Open Space (POS) funds in Rock Creek Hills Park would prevent the conversion of parkland into a school site. Last November, MCPS Superintendent Joshua Starr announced a new start on the site selection for the middle school. Restarting the process allows MCPS to conduct business openly. Dr. Starr hopes to address open meeting and other procedural complaints.

A brief review of the first two meetings of the Site Selection Advisory Committee (SSAC) was presented by Silver Spring resident Valarie Barr. She pointed out that while the new process included representatives from many communities near candidate park sites, other issues with the first siting process had not been addressed. For example, there has been no systematic evaluation of possible sites throughout the cluster. The criteria for evaluating the sites remained arbitrary and vague, and the factual basis of information used by the site selection committee remained undocumented.

At the first meeting of the second SSAC, the public sites were reviewed in an odd manner where each representative on the committee was allowed to make one and only comment about each site, usually by reading from the information presented by MCPS staff. Ms. Barr said there was no fact-checking, no analysis, and proper arguments were not allowed. Very small sites and sites that currently house elementary schools were eliminated. At the second meeting, the representatives were presented with a letter from Planning Chair Carrier stating that parks could not be used for the routine siting of



Residents living adjacent to the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park

schools and a letter requesting that MCPS comply with state law requiring them to submit building projects for review by M-NCPPC. Bill Gries from the Parks Department presented an analysis of the two letters. Fred Boyd from the Planning Commission then explained the difference between the mandatory referral of public site building, which is not binding, and reforestation plans, which are binding. Trees removed from a site, particularly trees in a forest, must be properly replaced. If the Planning Commission does not accept a reforestation plan, the affected project must be halted. Following this presentation, the meeting was closed to consider private sites. No public information is available about these sites.



Mendez Photo: Patch

Mark Mendez provided an update about the former military installation in the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park. Aerial photographs of the installation were hung on the walls of the Community Center along with testimonials from residents who remember the bunkers and buildings in the park. The Army has confirmed that there was anti-aircraft site, number W-91, in the park.



The effect of Program Open Space (POS) on site development was explained by resident Andrea Kelly. POS is a state program that allows local communities to use state and federal funds to acquire or develop land for recreational space. As Andrea stated, "POS funds are important because they come with strings attached. These include prohibitions against conversion of the land acquired or developed with these funds." The State Department of Natural Resources recently wrote that land acquired with POS funds can never be developed. For parks developed with POS funds, DNR has indicated that the restrictions only last for 20 years. In the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park, the eastern 6.67 acres were purchased with POS funds and approximately \$200,000 in POS funds were used in 2000 to upgrade its fields, playgrounds and paths. Thus, most of this park cannot be developed before 2020. In contrast, POS funds were used only for development (only) in Rock Creek Hills Park, 20 years ago. The DNR sees no problem with developing that park for a middle school in the near future, although the Homeowners' Association is strenuously objecting to the 20 year restriction because it is not codified in any rules.

The Help Save Our Park Coalition has doubts about the new site selection process. MCPS staff seems focused on avoiding payment for land and site development. Therefore, the SSAC continues to consider the use of parkland despite objections from the title-holder, the M-NCPPC. Residents feel that MCPS staff has not provided sufficient facts about each candidate site to allow the representatives to evaluate the sites. The process is still flawed by vague and unsubstantiated criteria. There does not appear to be an attempt to design a school based on the urban realities of the BCC cluster. As Mr. Paden noted, "The first site selection failed because the search was focused on using parkland that was not available. The second site selection is in danger of failing for the same reason-almost all of the candidate sites are parks that the M-NCPPSC has declared unavailable except in extraordinary circumstances."

At the end of the Feb. 8th SSAC meeting only two publicly owned sites remained under consideration, North Chevy Chase Park and Rock Creek Hills Park. At the next meeting on Feb. 22nd, the committee will review three private sites in closed session perhaps eliminating some or all of them, before opening the meeting to 'score' the remaining public and private sites. As many of the representatives view parks as easily available, cheap land, it is likely that they will recommend one or both parks to Superintendent Starr, who in turn will make a recommendation to the Board of education.



Summary submitted by Silver Spring Residents Valerie Barr, Andrea Kelly, Roger Paden and Mark Mendez for the February 2012 CM e-newsletter