

## Community Hero Award Goes to Save Our Park/Preserve Our Community Coalition

By Caren Madsen

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Anthropologist Margaret Mead would have been proud of a small group of community members who banded together recently to make a difference in their quiet but densely developed neighborhood in Montgomery County. In a neighborhood where multiple high-rise apartment buildings and single-family houses abut an industrial area, the *Save Our Parks/Preserve Our Community* coalition took a strong stand to save the 17-acre Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park in Silver Spring from becoming the next site for a middle school in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). For their passion, fast action and well-organized effort, the *Save Our Park/Preserve Our Community* coalition will be honored on June 13 with the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) "Community Hero" award.

On a Friday afternoon on March 25th, residents on a neighborhood e-mail list serving the Rosemary Hills community were alerted to a memorandum signed by MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast. The memo advised the Board of Education (BOE) that a Site Selection Advisory Committee made the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville park as the first choice for the site of a new middle school. The selection committee had reviewed 10 locations. Out of 10 sites on the review list, six sites were public parks.

Residents in the area were well-aware of the need for new schools to relieve over-crowding and supportive of maintaining a high-quality school system. But what they were not aware of until late March was a school selection process that had excluded them -- and had targeted their cherished and heavily-used local park for new school construction.



The BOE was to vote on the recommendation of the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park site the following Monday after residents were aware of the Weast memo. Community members mobilized immediately and formed a coalition. They contacted the BOE with



Save Our Parks/Preserve Our Community mobilized quickly and printed t-shirts for their cause.

urgent requests for the decision to be delayed due to the short notice to surrounding residents on the issue. They also filed public information requests quickly to get copies of documents related to the site selection process from MCPS.

Within days, the coalition set up a *Facebook* page, started a petition to save the park and ordered bright green t-shirts to promote their cause. They canvassed the neighborhood, contacted the media and started talking with local civic organizations, the Parents' Coalition of Montgomery County and Conservation Montgomery, an MCCF member and partner. Central to the Save Our Park coalition's message were that: 1) no one in the immediate neighborhood around the park had been included on the site selection committee and, 2) the community received word of the selection just a few days before a BOE vote was pending on the fate of Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park. They contended that the process was flawed and that the lack of community engagement on the part of MCPS was cause for the selection process to be revisited.



On April 21<sup>st</sup>, an emergency town hall meeting was held at the Coffield Community Center in Silver Spring and included a broad group of residents surrounding the park. The meeting drew over 200 people along with staff from County Council Members Ervin, Elrich and Leventhal's offices, Parks Department Director Mary Bradford and the local media. Out of over 35 people who made public comments that night, only six supported using the park as a site for the new middle school. Among those making

impassioned pleas to keep their parkland intact were middle and high school students from the area who use the park on a daily basis, as well as residents with a long history in the surrounding neighborhood.

Following the town hall meeting, letters to the BOE were sent by organizations, County Executive Leggett and many individuals. The Executive's letter steered the BOE away from the Rosemary Hills park and suggested Rock Creek Hills Park, which had once been the site of Kensington Junior High School and held reclaim rights for MCPS. However, the strongest letter by far was a weigh-in from Planning Board Chair Francoise Carrier, who backed Parks Director Bradford's April 21 admonition at the town hall meeting that, "...[The Department] was not inclined to give up public park space for other uses."

In Chair Carrier's letter, dated April 27<sup>th</sup> (the date the BOE had this item back on their agenda after the initial postponement), the facts spoke for themselves. Ms. Carrier pointed out that, "In some cases...State or federal money was used to purchase all or some of the property to make



the park improvements, and that money has use restrictions associated with it. This often amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars, as in this instance.”

She noted that the first and second choices for the school site: Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park and Rock Creek Hills Park, were viewed as unsuitable uses of parkland – unanimously by the Planning

Board. Chair Carrier said the Planning Board has serious concerns about the “..overall MCPS site selection process as it relates to identifying parkland for school sites.” She ended her letter by saying that both parks and schools are two primary reasons residents and businesses locate to Montgomery County, and said, “both are highly valued by our residents.”

On the evening of April 27<sup>th</sup>, the Save Our Parks Coalition assembled for the BOE meeting wearing their green t-shirts and armed with a complete set of documents, the chronology of events and a thorough analysis of what had transpired over the course of a month. Conservation Montgomery was represented on the panels of those testifying as well. The organization took the position that all county parkland should be protected from other uses. After reasoned public comments and discussion by the Board, the Board voted 6-1 to explore using the 13.4-acre Rock Creek Hills Park in Kensington instead of Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park for the middle school.

Leaving the BOE meeting that evening, what might have been a time of celebration was instead an almost somber moment among residents of the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville community. While they were relieved that their park had been removed from the site selection list, they realized that another nearby park was in jeopardy.

“We’ve wanted to be good neighbors and help the Kensington community hold on their park,” said Susan Buchanan, a spokesperson for the Save Our Parks coalition. “We’ve been willing to help Kensington residents fight for Rock Creek Hills Park the way we fought for our park. We don’t think any park should be sacrificed for other uses.”

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