

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Parks Department cluelessly lurches from CICO to UIOLI**

by Wayne Goldstein

The Montgomery County Department of Parks, part of the bi-county Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), is demonstrating once again that it is unable to learn from its mistakes, even a mistake that became one of the most humiliating episodes in its recent history. It has begun broad plans, under the guise of saving paltry amounts of money, to once again generate disbelief and intense anger in many residents who will be highly motivated to fight these plans. CICO - Carry-In, Carry-Out - a policy of removing all trash cans from county parks to save money, while expecting park users to then take their trash with them, was a public relations disaster for the Parks Department that was quickly ended. UIOLI - Use It Or Lose It - is a new policy designed to also save money by threatening to close and demolish or transfer ownership of a number of park recreation buildings if the public does not start using these facilities more frequently. In time, it too will become a PR disaster for the Parks Department and will also be ignobly ended.

Throughout 2003 and 2004, local papers had numerous letters from residents across the county who were bewildered that trash cans had been removed from their parks and that people were leaving trash in the park, often piled near where the trash cans used to be. They complained about the rats and the dog feces and how bad their parks then looked.

"The 'Carry-In, Carry-Out' trash program was enacted to save money as a result of county budget cuts. A pilot program took cans out of six parks in December 2002. Trash cans were removed from almost all county parks in December 2003, to save money in the solid waste management program in the parks. Since the implementation, residents have lobbied to have cans put back in, making a stink about the abundance of litter in the parks."

"8/16/03: Rats will love new 'carry-out' trash program - ... The 'carry-in, carry-out' policy is especially foolish in picnic areas that accommodate large groups. On a recent weekend, I jogged past a cookout of more than 30 people. Three days later, their mess was still there (except for what animals had consumed) in several overflowing bags... No doubt the local rat population is grateful to the Planning Board and its chairman, Derick Berlage, for trying to save a few dollars in this way. But I can't see a net benefit to anyone else."

"11/7/03: Can the cute slogans; pick up the trash - ... Instead of admitting that the plan is simply a revenue-driven cut in services, the park service, with the endorsement of the County Council, apparently felt the need to spend tax dollars on a campaign euphemistically referring to the cut as 'An Uncanny Affair!' and promoting trash can removal as some sort of community-building experience... Rather than spending tax dollars on cute labels, that money could have been spent on providing actual services to the communities that use the parks."

"3/16/04: Open letter to the county Planning Board: ... I've got to tell you that your policy to have people carry out their own trash has been a total disaster. There is trash all over the place... For years, there were public campaigns to keep our environment clean by not littering. Place your trash in a trash can they said. Now someone decided that to save a few dollars, everyone will remove their own trash... As it stands now, only a month or two after cans have been removed from the parks I use, there is garbage everywhere. It's like walking through a junkyard. Put the cans back into the parks."

The Parks Department ignored all of this. In October 2004, the Parks Superintendent wrote in a report: "...Although a clear picture of the cost savings of the program has not yet been determined, park managers

are beginning to see a decrease in litter, a decrease in work hours for collection, and savings in transfer station fees. With time, increased public awareness, and education, trash collection costs may be reduced even further... Park management staff identified the ten cleanest parks participating in the Carry-In, Carry-Out Program and issued a News Release thanking residents and civic groups for their cooperative community spirit... The litter control crews visit each of the 389 parks about once a week, and ballfield maintenance, trim and mow crews perform litter control prior to assuming their regular responsibilities. Litter control costs are balanced out by efficiencies realized in the disposal area."

In the face of a plan that the Planning Board Chair said would save \$600,000, the County Council partially repealed it on March 2004. One councilmember stated: "It's a dismal failure, it's not cost-effective, it raises environmental issues when you have trash in or near sensitive stream valleys. It ain't working, plain and simple." Another said: "Last week's council action doesn't go far enough... I'd like to see the trash cans go back everywhere. I think the whole thing was a bad idea."

Then, on 11/17/05, less than two years after this scheme was fully implemented, a press release was issued: MNCPPC "has restored trash cans to Montgomery County parks, reversing the 'Carry-In, Carry-Out' program for trash management... In December 2003 and January 2004, all trash cans were removed from neighborhood, local, stream valley and conservation parks. In May 2005 the County Council unanimously approved a funding increase in the fiscal year 2006 budget to restore trash cans in most parks and to improve maintenance response time. 'The program was an experiment designed to save money and to promote environmental stewardship for the parks,' said M-NCPPC Chairman Derick P. Berlage. 'In some parks, it worked. However, in our most heavily used parks, especially in the densely populated down-county areas, it did not work'."

CICO was concocted without ever asking the public what it thought. When people complained, MNCPPC did nothing to fix this huge new problem until the County Council told them to. No one believed that an agency getting more than \$100 million per year from the county needed to save \$600,000 a year by getting rid of trash cans. Now, less than 2 years after the absolute failure of CICO was officially acknowledged by MNCPPC, the Parks Department, again without asking the public what it thinks, wants to save \$215,000 per year by closing or transferring ownership of as many as 21 park recreation buildings located throughout the length and breadth of the county from Silver Spring and Chevy Chase to Spencerville, Clarksburg, and Beallsville.

The Parks Department claims that the need for present and future maintenance and the underuse of these buildings justify this new program which I call UIOLI - Use It Or Lose It. In effect, the Parks Department wants to blackmail dozens of communities that rely on these buildings by threatening to get rid of the buildings in some fashion if the residents don't start spending more of their money to rent the facilities more frequently. A more complex abbreviation for this scheme could be WTATBIYDUIM - We'll Take Away The Building If You Don't Use It More.

MCCF was there in early 2005 to help the Coalition to Return Trash Cans to Our Parks with its final push to end that hated policy. MCCF will also be there when I fully expect a new coalition to develop over this worse campaign to remove recreation buildings from our parks. We are already hearing from neighborhoods all across the county. It was not hard to physically return trash cans to parks. It will be extraordinarily difficult to rebuild demolished recreation buildings or to undo a future new ownership scheme that might look to maximize revenue and thus minimize community use. It is outrageous to tell communities that they must take responsibility for the longstanding failure of the Parks Department to effectively market and maintain its facilities.

For years, MCCF has observed the path taken by a Parks Department obsessed with spending \$6 million to build one just soccer field at a local park, despite the overwhelming opposition of the neighborhood. We've

heard the accusation made by some that the Parks Department has far too many park planners, and that they are engaged in creating elaborate make-work park plans to try to justify their salaries. For the last 6-year capital budget, the Parks Department sought \$80 million to buy parkland and \$170 million to build new park facilities. MNCPPC asked for \$118 million for this year's operating budget, including \$74 million for the Parks Department. Yet, it claims it couldn't afford to collect park trash a few years ago and now it claims it can't afford to spend far less to manage and maintain park recreation buildings.

I've written often in the past year about the growing need of the County Council to fill a vacuum and provide needed oversight of MCPS. With MNCPPC, through its Parks Department, now establishing a pattern of ill-conceived schemes born of cluelessness, shortsightedness, and a callous disinterest in the needs of the public, it may be time for the Council to add more oversight with this agency as well.