

"Federation Corner" column
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Proposal for Rockwood rocks Woodrock by Peggy Dennis, MCCF President

Let me start this story by explaining about Rockwood Manor Park. The Rockwood estate was originally owned by Mrs. Carolyn Caughey, who willed it to the Girls Scouts in 1936. It was run by them as the Girl Scout National Center from 1939 to 1979. "Since 1983," the Parks Department website tells us, "M-NCPPC has operated the park as a conference and education center. A highlight of the park is Rockwood Manor, a lovely and unique retreat that is perfect for weddings, meetings, and small conferences. The park also features a variety of overnight accommodations, including dormitories for youth groups." It is being run as a commercial, for-profit operation. It is supposed to be financially self-sustaining and plow whatever profits are generated back into the Parks Department to help fund other park needs. But during the last several years Rockwood Manor has lost money.

It seems the Parks Department has not learned how to best deal with the public they are supposed to serve. For the past year Mr. Terry Brooks, Division Chief of the Special Program Division of the Montgomery County Department of Parks was working with Sunny Pitcher, founder and owner of Potomac Paddlesports in Rockville. Mr. Pitcher had come to the Parks Department with an elaborate proposal to lease the entire Rockwood Manor Park complex and convert it into The National Outdoor Center. Who knew?

Apparently, the Board of Directors of the Woodrock Homeowners Association, the subdivision that backs up onto Rockwood Manor Park, knew but failed to include Mr. Pitcher's planned presentation on the agenda for their annual meeting. The board members and the few local residents who attended their annual meeting on November 9 were given the full pitch. Two days later, a local newspaper ran an article describing aspects of the proposal and "notifying" the public about an "informational meeting" scheduled for November 17. Six days was enough time for some Woodrock homeowners to fear the worst, act in concert, and gin up opposition to a proposal they had not yet seen or studied.

The informational meeting at Rockwood Manor did not go smoothly. Mr. Pitcher came with dozens of supporters, paddlers and cyclists who came to cheer him on. Residents of Woodrock came loaded for bear, many with fear and anger in their hearts. Some wanted only to have the meeting cancelled and rescheduled to a date for which they would have timely and official notification; not a newspaper article a few days in advance. Many wanted complete information on details of the proposal, including Mr. Pitcher's business plan, so they could study the material before that meeting. The two groups were at loggerheads, and opposition was angry and loud. Following the details of the presentation was difficult.

The homeowners were looking at a proposal that showed "stage one" bringing a bistro-style "VeloCafe" and bar; extending the patio and adding a deck for additional outdoor dining; installing wine and coffee bars; a bed & breakfast facility; converting the carport to a bike shop; installing kayak storage racks in the garage; adding outdoor retail and rental facilities; outdoor recreation programs; a bicycle shop; a wildlife rescue and nature center; community garden; and, community nature trail system. Neighboring homeowners had valid concerns about security, noise, late night partying and rowdy behavior, increased traffic, overflow parking on their street, loss of "peaceful use and enjoyment" of their own yards, and declining property values. By shutting out the neighboring community until the proposal was ready to be unveiled, these concerns were not addressed in a timely manner.

Keeping the local community in the dark about this major development proposal guaranteed one thing: opposition. Strong opposition! The baby might have been a future Einstein, but the bathwater had been

poisonously tainted with fear and anger. It is incredibly hard to address people's legitimate concerns and find common ground when mistrust and suspicion have already been sown.

The Parks Department realized too late that nearby residents should have been officially notified about the proposal much earlier and included as major stakeholders in a "community-based development process." By sending out a press release to newspapers shortly before the plan's unveiling, its demise was virtually assured. The proposal has been withdrawn. Mr. Pitcher has retreated. Woodrock residents are celebrating. And the project, which contained some admirable ideas that if designed with community input could have been a valuable public resource, is buried.

The lesson is apparent. Every park should serve and be closely linked to its surrounding community. Woodrock had approached the Parks Department some years ago requesting that a small area within the 44 acre park be allocated for a playground for local kids. They were rebuffed with the explanation that Rockwood Manor was a low impact park. Not surprisingly, they felt unwelcome and unable to use and enjoy the parkland right in their back yards.

The Parks Department should reach out to local residents to insure that every park is attractive to, used by and cared for by its neighbors. The Department's website indicates on its "volunteers" page that "Friends Groups" will be coming soon. For some years our Public Libraries have partnered with "Friends of the Library," whose members support most local branches. We applaud the Parks Department plan to create a similar system. Perhaps if there had been a "Friends of Rockwood Manor Park" bringing local residents and volunteers together with park management, then the park would have been viewed as a cherished local asset rather than a source of potential harm. In future, we hope proposals for every park "development" or change in use will be handled more wisely, collaboratively and harmoniously. As residents, we should be able to work with our government's officials and not in intense opposition. Let us all learn from this fiasco.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net