

"Federation Corner" column
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Permanent closing of park activity buildings hidden in budget

by Carole Ann Barth
Chair, MCCF Parks and Recreation Committee

Preface: On Friday, February 5, a press release was issued in Rockville announcing that on the following Monday the County Council's Planning, Housing and Economic Development (PHED) Committee would hold a worksession on the proposed closing of 11 park activity buildings at various local parks operated by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC).

The press release noted that, as part of County Executive Leggett's \$70 million Mid-Year Budget Savings Plan, M-NCPPC has originally proposed cutting maintenance for school ballfields. But, according to the press release, the PHED Committee "felt that this reduction would significantly impact the use of fields by students and groups that use the fields after school and on weekends. The committee asked M-NCPPC to identify an alternative to the \$181,300 that would have been saved by eliminating ballfield maintenance. M-NCPPC is now recommending closing 11 park activity buildings as an alternative. The recommendation is to close the buildings at this time and later determine the ultimate disposition of the facilities on a case-by-case analysis."

On Tuesday, February 9, the Council approved the Mid-Year Budget Savings Plan, which included closing the 11 park activity buildings through June 30. It now appears they are not funded in the Fiscal Year 2011 budget either, effectively closing these buildings permanently with no determination of "the ultimate disposition of the facilities on a case-by-case analysis" as promised in the February 5 press release.

The following comments, urging funding of the park activity buildings in the FY11 budget, were delivered at the April 7 County Council hearing by Carole Ann Barth, testifying as an individual.

Cut Waste, Not Services: Clearly there must be budget cuts, given the worsening structural deficit. But do you really think the best option is to maintain four separate staffs to operate four separate copies of the same reservations software while cutting the actual services those organizations (Montgomery County Recreation Department, Parks, Montgomery County Public Schools, and Community Use of Public Facilities Office) are meant to provide?

Supposedly, the duplicate systems exist because each agency has different rental policies and procedures. Still, this is not like negotiating NAFTA or drafting the Law of the Sea Treaty. Surely a standardized reservation system is within our capabilities. It is well past time to create a unified rental policy and lose the redundant systems.

Underutilized or Just Poorly Managed? The rationale for closing these particular 11 buildings is that they are considered "underutilized." Facility users know, however, that the reservation and permitting system is itself an obstacle to improved usage rates.

Booking two groups for the same time slot, lost bookings, reserved but unused time slots that aren't released; confusing and awkward online reservation pages; and inflexible time slots all conspire to make facility booking a painful and time-consuming process. Moreover, renters have always had to pick up building keys and sign papers during the work day--necessitating taking time off. Ironically, now that buildings have been closed for being underutilized, the Parks permit office will finally be providing evening hours for permitting and key pickup.

In addition to the reservation issues, most renters (civic groups, clubs, churches, and families) hold activities and events in the evening and on weekends. Usage rates, however, are calculated from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Daytime facility use, however, is more a function of programming. If programs geared to toddlers, school-age kids, job-seekers or retirees were offered, daytime usage could be increased. So, to be fair, the usage rates for weekdays should be calculated separately from the rates for evenings and weekends.

Why waste capital already invested in recent renovations? The recreation center in North Four Corners Local Park, near my home, has already been renovated. In recent years it has had a new foundation, air conditioning system, and roof installed. Yet a Parks' consultant rated its condition as "poor."

Supposedly, closing buildings rated "fair" or "poor" would save the County additional money that would otherwise be needed for expensive repairs and renovation. Closing the North Four Corners Recreation Center, however, would actually waste capital already invested in upkeep rather than avoiding future expenses.

This disconnect between this one building's rated condition and its actual condition made me curious, so we looked at the other 10 buildings: Owens Park in Beallsville; Lynnbrook Park in Bethesda; Maplewood-Alta Vista Park in Bethesda; North Chevy Chase Park; Camp Seneca in Boyds; Clarksburg Neighborhood Park; Colesville Local Park; Nolte in Silver Spring; Stoneybrook Park in Wheaton; and, Ken-Gar Palisades in Kensington (where the building is named in honor of the late slave-turned-abolitionist, county resident Josiah Henson).

They all appeared to be sound and basically in good repair. We saw no cracks, signs of settling, or crumbling foundations. Exterior walls, whether log, brick, siding, or cinder block, showed no damage or staining. The roofs and air conditioning units appeared to be in good shape and of reasonably recent origin (as shown in photos given to the Council). Before permanently closing these buildings, you should know what has already been invested in repairs, preventive maintenance, and capital renewal.

Local Parks and Walkable Neighborhoods: Partners for a Livable, Sustainable Future. The North Four Corners Recreation Center and Park function as an important community space, helping us to build community ties. In turn, as volunteer stewards, we help to protect and enhance park assets. To thrive, we need each other.

A recent email from the Parks Department screamed, "Drastic Cuts Hurt Quality Park Services." Yet the Parks Department continues to protect a Facilities Planning staff twice the size of Fairfax County's. Take a hard look at where our money really goes, and cut the waste. It is possible to improve services and realize cost savings at the same time, for example by ending the waste of duplicate booking systems.

Fund programs and services that make a difference such as the park recreation centers, tree aftercare, invasive plant control, plant waste recycling, and deer management. Take a stand for healthy parks and neighborhoods, County Council, and residents will stand with you.

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