

"Federation Corner" column

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## **Community Heroes save their local park**

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A small group of residents banded together recently to make a difference in their quiet but densely developed neighborhood in Montgomery County. In a community 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 High School cluster. For their passion, fast action and well-organized effort, the coalition will be honored at the June 13 Federation meeting with a "Community Hero" award.

On the afternoon of Friday, March 25th, residents on a Rosemary Hills community e-mail list were alerted to a memorandum signed by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Superintendent Jerry Weast advising the Board of Education (BOE) that a Site Selection Advisory Committee made the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park the first choice for the site of a new middle school. The selection committee had reviewed ten locations, six of which were public parks.

Residents in the area were aware of the need for a new middle school to relieve overcrowding, and were supportive of maintaining a high-quality school system. But they were not aware until late March that a site selection process had excluded them, and had targeted their cherished and heavily-used local park for a new school.

The BOE was to vote on approving the Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park site the following Monday after residents became aware of the Weast memo. Community members mobilized immediately and formed a coalition. They contacted the BOE with requests to delay the decision due to the short notice to residents living near the park. They also filed public information requests quickly to get copies of documents related to the site selection process.

Within days, the coalition set up a Facebook page, started a petition to save the park, and ordered 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 coalition's message was 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 scheduled on the fate of their local park. They contended that the process was flawed and the lack of community engagement was cause for the selection process to be revisited.

On April 21, an emergency town hall meeting was held at the Coffield Community Center, which is located in the targeted local park. The meeting drew over 200 attendees--neighborhood residents, along with staff from County Council Members Ervin, Elrich and Leventhal's offices, Parks Department Director Mary

Bradford and the local media. Of over 35 people who made public comments that night, only six supported using the park for a new middle school. Area middle and high school students who use the park on a daily basis, as well as residents with a long history in the neighborhood, made impassioned pleas to keep their parkland intact.

Following this 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. The strongest letter by far came from Planning Board Chair Francoise Carrier, who backed Parks Department Director Bradford's admonition at the April 21 town hall meeting that, "[The Department] was not inclined to give up public park space for other uses."

In Chairman Carrier's letter, dated April 27th (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 a middle school site--Rosemary Hills-Lyttonsville Park and Rock Creek Hills Park--were unanimously viewed by the Planning Board as unsuitable uses of parkland. Ms. Carrier said the 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, 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. After reasoned public comments and discussion by the Board, the members 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. They were relieved their park had been removed from the site selection list, but realized 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."

On June 13, MCCF will honor Susan Buchanan, Leonor Chaves, Patricia Tyson, Charlotte Coffield, Joel and Mya Teitelbaum, Jean Redman and Mark Mendez for their exemplary work in pulling their community together to save their local park. They are true 'Community Heroes'.

*The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-100 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to [theelms518@earthlink.net](mailto:theelms518@earthlink.net)*