

"Federation Corner" column
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Tale of Brickyard Road site and Nick's organic farm

by Ginny Barnes
Co-Chair, MCCF Environment Committee

This past March, adjacent neighbors and organic farmer Nick Maravell learned of an impending Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE) vote to turn the Brickyard Road Middle School site over to the county for ball fields. Mr. Maravell, who has leased the middle school site in Potomac for the past 31 years, was given just two business days notice that his lease would be terminated by the action. No one had any idea that there had even been discussions between the BoE and County Executive. The Potomac community was shocked.

Nick Maravell is a nationally recognized organic farmer who has maintained the 20 acres for growing non-genetically modified seed corn. The site is ideal for this use since it is located amidst low density housing where no other agricultural uses interfere with creating untainted seed. Despite protests about lack of adequate notice, the BoE vote was taken on March 8, which is when citizens learned the sole objective of the new lease to the county was to create soccer fields. Shockingly, for two years prior to this the County Executive's office had been in communication with soccer organizations about taking over the site for a soccer field complex by means of a public/private partnership.

Typically, when the BoE does not plan to build on an existing school site, it goes through a process of declaring the property "surplus". This allows other public uses to be considered, including parkland or housing with subsequent transfer of ownership. Master plans often provide direction on potential uses of surplus school sites. The Potomac Subregion Master Plan names the site specifically, saying "The Brickyard Junior High School, Kendale Elementary, and Churchill Elementary School sites could be developed as local parks with ball fields or other recreational uses...Any site acquired for parkland should be evaluated to determine whether it is appropriate for recreational opportunities (e.g.; trails, ball fields, etc.)."

The term "local park" is defined in the county "Park, Recreation, and Open Space Plan" (PROS) as being less than 50 acres and intended for use by the surrounding community. Had this site been declared surplus as anticipated, it would be evaluated as a potential local park offering a range of amenities determined by local need. As such, it is subject to thorough, transparent, prescribed and inclusive public process through the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC).

This is not the case here. County Executive Isiah "Ike" Leggett and the BoE circumvented an open process by leasing the property directly to the government, which will enter into a contract with a private soccer organization through issuance of a Request for Proposals (RFP). The County Executive Office assured the Potomac community there would be ample opportunity for input, especially in determining additional amenities for the site such as a playground, picnic area or community gardens.

On April 4th, while the lease was pending, the County Executive Office held the first of two formal public meetings, which attracted more than 200 attendees who were assured by David Dise, Director of the Department of General Services, that the County Executive Office wanted input on additional uses. Dise said that if, in satisfying the additional recreational needs of the local community, they could not fit enough soccer fields to make the public/private partnership viable to a soccer organization, then perhaps, as he put it, "the juice would not be worth the squeeze."

The lease signed with the BoE a few days after the April 4th meeting specifically says the site will be used only for soccer fields. When the lease was made public, citizen concern that only lip service would be paid to

an open process led a locally-formed group called Citizens for Transparency to start researching the history of the soccer field plan. Using public documents, including minutes of one soccer organization, Montgomery Soccer Inc. (MSI), they discovered the existence of MSI's \$350,000 fund used to lobby the government for more fields. A second public meeting was held on June 9th and focused on the RFP. The county continued to move ahead without addressing discrepancies in the lease language.

The County Executive and the BOE have ignored the public and circumvented recommendations in the Potomac Master Plan, while there is no process available to fight for this open space at M-NCPPC. The precedent being set serves as dire warning for every community master plan. Civic organizations throughout the county work tirelessly to defend master plans as the tools we can count on to predict and determine growth. If the lack of public process regarding the Brickyard Road site is allowed to stand, this will surely happen elsewhere in the county using similar tactics

There are dozens of unanswered questions about how we reached this point with a lease already signed and an RFP looming yet no review whatsoever of site suitability. There should be a preliminary traffic study to determine if a mini-Soccerplex superimposed on a neighborhood of narrow winding roads without sidewalks is appropriate. Another concern is the seemingly low rental price for the site's new use. The BOE leased the site to Mr. Maravell for \$1,300 a year, in line with what farmers usually pay per acre. But the BoE is leasing it to the county to turn over to soccer use for \$1,500 a year, only \$200 more.

One of the most troubling aspects of this issue is the actual loss of Nick's Organic Farm and what that represents to Montgomery County and the food movement. Organic farms are all about the soil, and Mr. Maravell has been building soil on the site for 31 years. County Executive staff has described the farm as "vacant land" and said it "serves no public use." Why don't we consider producing healthy and safe food as important a public benefit to our community as soccer? Montgomery County has been celebrated as visionary. Let us uphold that reputation by stopping this flawed process and starting over. If soccer fields are really the best use of land, then we deserve an inclusive and transparent process to determine it.

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