



MEMORANDUM

DATE: April 2, 2012

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Mary Bradford, Director of Parks *M Bradford*
 Michael F. Riley, Deputy Director, Administration *MR*
 Dr. John E. Hench, Ph.D., Chief, Park Planning and Stewardship Division (PPSD) *J Hench*

FROM: Brooke Farquhar, Supervisor, Park & Trail Planning, PPS Division *Brooke Farquhar*
 Rachel Newhouse, Planner Coordinator, Park & Trail Planning, PPS Division *Rachel Newhouse*
 Fred Boyd, Planner Coordinator, Montgomery County Planning Department *fb*

SUBJECT: Bethesda-Chevy Chase Middle School #2 Site Selection Mandatory Referral

Recommended:

Staff recommends that the Planning Board not accept MCPS’s site selection advisory committee’s recommendation to construct the new BCC Middle School #2 on the site of either the current Rock Creek Hills Local Park or North Chevy Chase Local Park. Instead, staff recommends that MCPS take a harder look at the viability of three other options. These three options include:

- Purchase of a private site
- The former Montgomery Hills Junior High School Site
- The former Lynnbrook Elementary School site and the adjacent Lynnbrook Local Park

Both the Montgomery Hills and Lynnbrook sites were on the original list evaluated by MCPS’s site selection advisory committee, as well as 13 private sites that were reviewed confidentially.

Background

Site Selection Advisory Committee Process

In April 2011, the Board of Education selected Rock Creek Hills Local Park as the site for a new middle school in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Cluster, following a site selection process that began in December 2010. Sustained criticism of the chosen site and the process by which it was selected prompted Superintendent Joshua P. Starr to recommend that a more inclusive and transparent process be devised for selecting a middle school

site. The Board of Education rescinded its initial decision in November 2011 and the Superintendent of Schools ordered that a second site selection process be conducted.

MCPS revised the site selection process in several ways designed to enhance public participation and improve openness. It engaged a facilitator to run meetings, manage discussions and monitor the site ranking process. It broadened participation by including civic representatives along with parent groups, local government experts and MCPS staff. It encouraged these committee members to offer their own candidate sites for consideration. It enabled committee members who disagreed with the selection to prepare responses. It made the committee report—with minority viewpoints—available for public comment prior to the superintendent's decision on candidate sites.

The 47-member 2012 Site Selection Advisory Committee met four times in January and February. The committee examined 38 candidate sites—25 public and 13 private—identified by MCPS staff and committee members, including several proposed by M-NCPPC representatives to the committee. The committee based its examination on eight criteria devised by schools staff: location, size, topography, access, availability of utilities, physical condition, land availability and cost. Agency and MCPS staff functioned both as resources and committee members, analyzing and voting on individual sites while providing information on regulatory procedures, school program requirements and procedures, street access, traffic operations and other transportation issues, and park design, operations and management including permitting data for athletic fields. Discussions of public sites were open to the public; the committee discussed privately owned sites in closed session, following the state's Open Meetings Act.

Using a majority voting system, the committee reviewed each site, then voted to keep it on the list of candidates or eliminate it from further consideration. Size, land availability and physical condition emerged in the committee discussions as decisive criteria; the committee eliminated a number of candidate sites by large margins because members had been persuaded that the site was too small, that its owners were unwilling to sell or that physical conditions on the site made it clearly unsuitable for a school. The committee eliminated 36 of the 38 sites using majority voting.

The remaining two sites—Rock Creek Hills Local Park and North Chevy Chase Local Park—were individually scored by committee members using the eight criteria. If a member considered a site "good" under the specific criterion, it rated a score of "1;" if the site could be considered "average," it rated a "0;" if a member considered the site "poor," it rated a "-1." Members rated both candidates under all eight criteria; a site could achieve a maximum total of 8 and a minimum total of -8. Facilitators then totaled each committee member's score for each site. The site with the most points was deemed the preferred site for the new school. The committee total for Rock Creek Hills Local Park was 130. The total for North Chevy Chase Local Park was 28. The committee forwarded both sites to the Superintendent.

The committee's preferred sites

Rock Creek Hills Local Park

Rock Creek Hills Local Park is located south and east of the Town of Kensington, on Saul Road east of Connecticut Avenue. Its 13 acres are the residual portion of Kensington Junior High School, which was closed in 1979 and transferred to M-NCPPC for park use. The remaining approximately eight acres are now owned by the Housing Opportunities Commission and used for elderly housing. The park's recreational facilities include two full-sized soccer fields, two tennis courts, a roller skating rink, a playground, a gazebo, picnic area, and a half basketball court. A walking path encircles the soccer fields.

The recreation facilities at Rock Creek Hills are situated on a plateau at the highest point of the park. There are significant slopes that descend from the athletic fields south to Saul Road and west to the valley of Silver Creek, adjacent to Kensington Parkway. There are beautiful large specimen trees scattered throughout the site, although there is no "technical" forest.

In 2011, permits were issued for more than 1,200 hours of weekday and weekend activities on the park's two full-sized soccer fields. Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School used the fields for interscholastic athletics each weekday afternoon throughout the autumn.

North Chevy Chase Local Park

North Chevy Chase Local Park is located on Jones Bridge Road, just west of Connecticut Avenue. Its 31 acres include a recreation building, two baseball fields with a soccer overlay, two tennis courts, and a full basketball court. The baseball fields are located roughly in the center of the park, with the tennis courts located in a stand of trees in the same general area. The soccer field is overlaid on one of the baseball fields. The recreation building is located just south of the baseball fields. The park is largely forested with moderate slopes that run from north to south.

The North Chevy Chase Local Park, while well located within the cluster with adequate acreage, is adjacent to the Naval Medical Center. Staff noted that MCPS Site selection committee members had expressed concerns about locating a middle school at this location because it would exacerbate existing and future traffic congestion associated with the implementation of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC). Staff agrees with the Committee's position. In addition the site is also heavily wooded with the exception of the athletic fields.

In 2011, permits were issued for almost 1,400 hours of weekday and weekend activities on the park's main athletic fields. The local Bethesda Chevy Chase high school used these fields for interscholastic athletics on weekday afternoons throughout the autumn. One of the two baseball fields is the official home of Bethesda Little League (BLL), Inc. BLL's field is the only "official" Little League field in Montgomery County. The field was designed to meet the required field dimensions and layout for Little League game play as authorized and mandated by Little League Baseball.

Discussion

Staff's recommendation reflects a strategy of first avoiding park impacts, secondly minimizing park impacts, and third, mitigating and or compensating for park impacts. By looking first to a private site for the future BCC MS, staff would have MCPS avoid impacts to existing park facilities. This is staff's preferred option. The current site selection report indicates that there was in fact a private option that was well supported by a near majority of committee members. It was also the understanding of staff that this particular site is owned by a willing seller. Accordingly staff recommends that MCPS pursue this option.

Staff's second option involves the former site of the Montgomery Hills Junior High School and also avoids any park impacts. This particular site is currently leased by Montgomery County, Maryland to Yeshiva of Greater Washington, Inc. According to Superintendent Joshua Starr, the lease on this site cannot be terminated until 2020.

Staffs preferred third option involves Lynnbrook Local Park and the adjacent Lynnbrook Elementary school site, although staff recognizes the impact this might have on the public's ability to get permits for field use. In 2011, Lynnbrook Local Park field was permitted for a total of 784 weekday and weekend hours. If Lynnbrook Local Park is chosen by MCPS, staff would recommend that park impacts be minimized to the greatest degree possible. For those impacts that could not be minimized, park staff would recommend MCPS replace lost park facilities with new land and facilities of equal or greater value.

In order to assess the feasibility of our recommendations, we did the following:

- Staff obtained a minimum program of requirements for a new middle school based on the Lakelands MS (the model cited by MCPS staff on which their site selection criteria was based):
 - 153,588 s.f. building on a 2.0 acre footprint (87,120 s.f.)
 - Bus Loop – 25 buses – 1.0 acres
 - Car Parking – 125 - .9 acres
 - Student drop-off Aisle - .5 acre
 - Tennis courts – 4 - .6 acre
 - Basketball courts – 2 - .3 acre
 - Track Pavement - .2 acre
 - Soccer Field with Two Softball overlay – 3.0 acres
 - Loading Zone - .3 acre
 - Stormwater Management – 1.3 acres

- In order to better appreciate the potential for flexibility in site design, staff took a detailed look at each of the three concepts prepared by the MCPS consultant for the Rock Creek Hills site:
 - The proposed building concepts ranged in sizes and shapes from a four-story 153,000 square foot building to a three-story 155,000 square foot building.
 - The bus loops were in various configurations but all accommodated between 20 buses.
 - The parking lots on the three Rock Creek Hills options all had a student drop-off lane that was separated from the car parking and bus loops and ranged from accommodating 95-105 cars.
 - Each option had four tennis courts and each option had two basketball courts shown on the site.
 - Finally the Rock Creek Hills options all show one large (or two small 160' x 180') rectangular fields and a diamond field over lay with a skinned in-field (softball). This information is provided in column two in the chart below.

- Staff then visited the Montgomery Hill and Lynnbrook sites and conducted a visual assessment of the site taking into account topography, existing vegetation (especially specimen trees), existing improvements, transportation infrastructure (including drive aisles, bus turn arounds and parking), and the character of the adjacent community.
- Back in the office, park staff prepared detailed maps using the resource atlas. These maps provided an aerial view of existing features including topography, steep slopes, highly erodible soils, streams and their environmental buffers and tree cover. These maps served as the base layer upon which the various elements of the program of requirements were arranged.
- Park staff then test fit the minimum MS program of requirements to the Montgomery Hills and Lynnbrook sites. Details associated with this “test fit” exercise appear below. It should be noted that the exercise involving Lynnbrook included two options. Option “A” sought to minimize to the greatest degree possible impacts to mature canopy trees on the site. Option “B” gave no special consideration to existing trees.

Test Fitting the Minimum Program of Requirements for a MS to the Montgomery Hills and Lynnbrook sites:

Staff then used the same building footprint as was used for the Rock Creek Hills Option 3 and applied it to the Montgomery Hills site (*see column three in the chart below.*) The building footprint (155,000 s. f.) was placed on the current site of the Yeshiva School building. A bus parking loop and turn around was placed on the existing parking lot to the west of the school, adding 22 bus spaces and 12 car spaces and keeping the parking entrance on Brookville Road. A parking lot for 70 cars was added to the asphalted area behind the proposed school building and the existing parking along the east road adjacent to the neighborhood was kept as is. The existing grassy open space behind the existing school will accommodate four tennis courts, a skinned diamond field over lay and a rectangular field. The basketball courts were located on the asphalt bus parking for use when the busses are not there (which is for most for the day). The existing drop off loop and parking at the front of the building were kept intact. The playground near the Brookville Road side can remain.

Next, Staff looked at applying the middle school program to the Lynnbrook Local Park and Elementary School site (*see column four in the chart below.*) This is a beautiful park setting with large mature trees and rolling topography. In order to keep as much of the mature trees as possible, staff developed a concept that maintained the footprints of the existing school and center (*see option “A” in the chart below.*) A new four story building on the footprints of the existing school and center would provide 158,400 square feet of classroom space, leaving the asphalt pad to the back of the building for a bus loop and turn around for 20 buses. The bus entrance would be off of the Maple Avenue cul-de-sac. The existing parking along Lynnbrook Drive would be increased from 43 spaces to 60 spaces and the existing parking for 35 cars along Newdale Road would remain. The five parking spaces at the north side of the property off of the Lynnbrook Road loading entrance would also remain. This would provide a total of 100 parking spaces. There are two existing tennis courts so these would remain and two new tennis courts would be added south of the proposed bus loop at the site of the small

existing playground. The large playground under the trees would remain and the park activity building could be used to accommodate the day care program currently on-site. The student drop off could be accommodated on the southern side of the site by adding a ten foot wide drop of lane to the existing Lynbrook Drive as it extends from Newdale Road. The two basketball courts would be painted onto the asphalt that is being used for the bus drop-off area and could be used when the buses are not on site (which is for most of the day).

If saving the mature trees on the Lynbrook site is not a consideration, as it was not in the MCPS feasibility study for Rock Creek Hills, then a concept that relocates the entire existing on-street car parking onto the site in a new parking lot and locates the four tennis courts to the back of the site could be pursued (*see option "B" in the chart below.*)

MCPS's MS program of requirements applied to Rock Creek Hills, Montgomery Hills and Lynbrook				
Typical MCPS Middle School Program Requirements	Program of requirements applied to the Rock Creek Hills site (MCPS Feasibility Study): Options 1,2, and 3	Program of requirements applied to the Montgomery Hills site	Program of requirements applied to the Lynbrook site	
			Option "A" - With tree saving efforts	Option "B" - Without tree saving efforts
Smallest existing MS currently at Lakelands building – 153,588 s.f. - 2.0 acres	Building footprints – Option 1 – 4 story 153,000 s.f. Option 2 – 4 story 151,000 s.f. Option 3 – 3 story 155,000 s.f.	Building footprint- 3 story 155,000 s.f.	Building footprint – 4 story - 158,400 s.f.	Building footprint – 4 story - 158,400 s.f.
Bus Loop – 25 buses – 1.0 acres	Option 1 – 20 buses Option 2 – 20 buses Option 3 – 20 buses	Bus loop – 22 buses	Bus loop – 20 buses	Bus loop – 20 buses
Car Parking – 125 - .9 acres	Op. 1 – 105 spaces Op. 2 - 100 spaces Op. 3 – 95 spaces	Over 100 spaces	100 spaces along the street	100 spaces on site
Student drop-off Aisle - .5 acre	Provided on all 3 options	Yes	Yes	Yes
Tennis courts – 4 - .6 acre	4 provided on all 3 options	4	4	4
Basketball courts – 2 - .3 acre	2 provided on all 3 options	2	2	2
Track Pavement - .2 acre	Shown on option 1			
Soccer Field with Two Softball overlay – 3.0 acres	A soccer field with softball field overlay is on all three options	A soccer field with softball field overlay	A soccer field with softball field overlay	A soccer field with softball field overlay
Loading Zone - .3 acre	Shown on all three options	Yes	Yes at existing location	Yes at existing location
Stormwater Management – 1.3 acres	Must be accommodated	Must be accommodated	Must be accommodated	Must be accommodated

Conclusions

Staff recommends that the Planning Board not accept MCPS's site selection advisory committee's recommendation to construct the new BCC Middle School #2 on the site of either the current Rock Creek Hills Local Park or North Chevy Chase Local Park.

Both of the park sites selected by the MCPS's Site Selection Committee (i.e., Rock Creek Hills Local Park and North Chevy Chase Local Park) contain large areas devoted to playing fields. Rock Creek Hills has two adult-sized rectangular fields for soccer and North Chevy Chase contains two baseball/softball fields and an overlapping small soccer field. The recently completed Vision 2030 Strategic Plan for Parks and Recreation found that the South Central part of the county, which includes Bethesda and Chevy Chase, has the lowest level of overall parks and recreation services in the County, based on its population. Loss of these fields, even if a school proposed for a site includes recreation facilities, represents a significant loss of recreation opportunities, in addition to the environmental costs associated with loss of forest.

Staff has premised its analysis of public properties examined by the MCPS site selection committee on the idea, articulated in the Chair letter of December 22, 2011 to Board of Education President Brandman, that "parks should not be made available for non-park purposes except in extraordinary circumstances." This notion established the foundation of staff's responses to the committee's report. Neither response reflexively opposes the use of parkland for the new middle school. The staff responses do suggest that the committee members lacked important analytical tools needed to determine if extraordinary circumstances existed in this case. These tools included a more complete understanding of the consequences of reducing available playing fields in this part of the County, the costs of replacing these fields, the relative cost and complexity connected with acquiring privately owned land, and an understanding of the larger role parkland plays in community life. In their absence, staff cannot state that the "extraordinary circumstances" criterion has been met.

The Chair's statement, as noted in the paragraph above, closely aligns with similar language found in the 2005 PROS plan; "Lands and facilities under the control of the Maryland – National Capital Park and Planning Commission are held as a public trust for the enjoyment and education of present and future generations. The Commission is pledged to protect these holdings from encroachment that would threaten their use as parkland. The Commission recognizes that under rare circumstances non-park uses may be required on park property in order to serve the greater public interest."

Because the Site Selection Advisory Committee identified two park sites as its preferences for the new middle school, Staff's evaluation necessarily focuses on parks. It offers more detailed analytical information on sites the committee examined and eliminated. Staff believes that this additional information can and should be used by schools staff to reevaluate alternative public sites to those the committee identified.

Staff is opposed to the taking of Rock Creek Hills Local Park because of the significant tree clearing that is required to accommodate a middle school program and the loss of an adult sized rectangular field, of which 25 are currently lacking in the down county Bethesda/Chevy Chase Team area according to the field needs identified in the 2005 Land Preservation, Parks and Recreation Plan (PROS).

Staff is recommending that MCPS reconsider the former Montgomery Hills Junior High School site because of its ability to accommodate the middle school program. This site allows for the accommodation of the MS program with little damage to the land or large trees and there is no loss of parkland. This is Staff's preferred option if a private site cannot be found.

Staff is recommending that MCPS lastly reconsider the former Lynnbrook Elementary School and Lynnbrook Local Park site. Given that this option involves the taking of park land for non-park purposes, this is staff's option of last resort. This option relies on MCPS using part of their inventory, i.e., the former Lynnbrook Elementary school, in order to assemble a site large enough to accommodate the proposed program. Further, Lynnbrook Local Park, at approximately six acres, is much smaller than either Rock creek Hills Local Park at 13 acres or North Chevy Chase Local Park at 31 acres and only includes one athletic field as opposed to two. Option "A" accommodates the middle school program with use of the existing parking on the streets and minor loss of mature trees. Option "B" accommodates the middle school program, but would require significant tree loss to accommodate on-site parking.

Staff recommends that MCPS look hard at three additional options before taking and or impacting existing parks. These three options include:

- Any private site
- The former Montgomery Hills Junior High School Site
- The former Lynnbrook Elementary School site and the adjacent Lynnbrook Local Park

Bcc: Brian Woodward, Chief, Southern Region Parks
Piera Weiss, Deputy Director of Planning