



## **Aurora Highlands Civic Association**

January 18, 2016

Aurora Highlands Civic Association  
P.O. Box 25201  
Arlington, VA 22202

Lisa Grandle  
Park Development Division Chief  
Department of Parks and Recreation  
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 414  
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Ms. Grandle:

The recent opening of the east side of Virginia Highlands Park (VHP) has brought to the fore DPR's disregard for serious community engagement during the design and construction of the east side. Below I lay out three major concerns, although there are others I could cite, among constituents of the Aurora Highlands Civic Association (AHCA) in the hope that we will avoid similar pitfalls as we work together to design improvements to the west side of VHP this year.

First, we were deeply disturbed by the lack of notice and opportunity for any real input regarding the design of the east side of VHP. In the December 14 meeting Mike Dowell and I had with you, Jane Rudolph, and Laura Lazour, we discussed DPR's lack of collaboration with the community in designing the east side improvements. The only opportunity for community input that we were aware of was an online survey about youth basketball courts that effectively asked residents to make a Hobson's choice between two virtually identical options, both of which involved a significant – and in our view, unnecessary and unrequested – increase in the area being converted from green space to paved ball courts and walkways.

Second, when we visited the east side of VHP this weekend for the first time since it reopened on Friday, we were quite surprised to observe several significant departures from the plans provided and posted around the park. In particular:

- (1) Even more green space has been lost due to the addition of a bleacher section and related concrete pathway and foundation; and
- (2) A large rain garden area, not in the plans we saw, was included in the project, resulting in an additional loss of green space.

While we understand that unforeseeable issues may arise and that plans may change on short notice, it is inexcusable that the community had no opportunity for input about such large-scale changes prior to construction of these new elements. We, as always, stand ready to provide feedback, suggestions, and helpful comments and insight, on short notice if necessary, in order to ensure that VHP remains a

valuable asset in our area. We trust that in the future, you will engage us on any changes to underlying design plans, especially with regard to the west side of VHP.

Third, we have serious concerns with the way that the green space between the tennis courts and the artificial turf soccer field has been transformed into a second soccer field, despite assurances in recent years that this would remain open free space and not be formalized into a soccer field. We were provided no advance notice or opportunity to provide feedback or suggestions on this taking. This action is indefensible. Major programmatic changes such as the transformation of open space to restricted-use space are important policy decisions that should not be undertaken without community input.

As these three recent examples demonstrate, we are deeply disappointed with the processes that have been used in the past to make changes to the landscape and uses of VHP. We therefore request that we be provided advance notice and a reasonable opportunity to provide our input for any proposed changes to VHP that rise above the level of routine, regular maintenance such as lawn mowing. An example is removal of trees. Advance communication when numerous or large trees are removed would provide us with the opportunity to understand the reasons that such actions might be necessary, so we can communicate that to concerned residents. As VHP falls squarely within our boundary, we have a responsibility to ensure that the park is well taken care of for generations to come. We ask that you provide us with an opportunity to do so.

I trust that in designing the improvements to the west side of VHP, the process will be collaborative and iterative with our civic association. We stand ready to assist and meet with you on the design planning as often as is necessary to come to a final design plan of which we all can be proud. As we also discussed at our meeting in December, we will be submitting a proposed AHCA design plan to DPR in mid-February as a starting point. Jane Rudolph represented that you would not begin working on DPR's design plan until March at the earliest. However, if your plans change, please contact me immediately if you need us to submit our proposal to you sooner for it to be timely and receive all due consideration.

I look forward to working with you this upcoming year as we put together a joint proposal for improving the west side of VHP.

Sincerely,

*Natasha Atkins*

Natasha Atkins  
President  
Aurora Highlands Civic Association

cc: Jane Rudolph, Director, Arlington Department of Parks and Recreation  
Laura Lazour, Director of Public Relations, Arlington Department of Parks and Recreation  
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager  
Libby Garvey, County Board Chair  
Jay Fiset, County Board Vice-Chair  
Katie Cristol, County Board Member  
Christian Dorsey, County Board Member  
John Vihstadt, County Board Member