



Civic Association Calls on County to Preserve Public Space, Commit to Eco Priorities and Preserve a Historic School

In the face of a controversial development plan hearing next week, Aurora Highlands Civic Association (AHCA) President, Rachel Hicks, called on the County to focus on preservation of public space and an ecofriendly approach to development. “We should all work to maintain the few public spaces we have to provide the critical, essential public services the rapidly growing residents need, and as the county originally planned.” She goes on to say “this site has been designated as public and should not become a residential site with no greenspace.” Nicholas Giacobbe, a resident and civic leader who has been part of the discussions was blunt, “This is an opportunity we can’t afford to miss. Preservation of the open space and historic school building can serve as a model for other communities and a centerpiece of our neighborhood.” The Park located next to the site, Nelly Custis, is currently “100% the heart of the community where the kids play after school, wait for the bus each morning, and have birthday parties” said Jess Kingsley, a resident. If the project were to go forward as planned at six stories, it would completely change the feel of the park and the surrounding community.

A controversial development proposal in Aurora Highlands plans to remove the public use designation, to reduce tree coverage next to a park, and to demolish a century old historic school in exchange for building over 100 units of higher density affordable housing.

AHCA has explained to the County that there are many properties available nearby that are already zoned for higher density housing, but this site was given to the county in 1921 as part of the neighborhood expressly for a school and remains one of the only spaces designated for public use such as schools, libraries, and community centers– something the community desperately needs.

Although some portray this as a two-sided battle, Stacy Meyer, an architect with experience in developing affordable housing in the DC area argues that, with a creative approach, the plan could preserve trees, and green space as part of development. “With a renewed focused effort, working together, we could preserve the mature trees, protect the small existing park and save the historic school building.”

At a public hearing of the Planning Commission on Monday, May 6, AHCA will again request the County preserve the public designation of the site. It will also present an [alternative development](#) example that preserves the open space and the historic school on a scale more in line with the existing density of the neighborhood. AHCA’s example adheres to the policy goals of the Crystal City and Pentagon City Sector Plans, which both advocate for a taper down to a low density neighborhood. AHCA has been supportive of affordable housing efforts within its boundaries, including a project two blocks away, but the concerns with greenspace, size, historic preservation, and loss of public use, among others, have prevented any support for this project from the AHCA which has overwhelmingly voted against this proposed rezoning.

Background

AHCA has been working to make the case to preserve the public resources of the 22202 neighborhood. The County, however, appears poised to approve a special General Land Use Plan (GLUP) amendment to change the historic Nelly Custis School site from public use in a low density neighborhood to residential, at a much higher level of density.

The Nelly Custis School was built in 1923 on property deeded “for school use.” When the school was closed and sold to a nonprofit with an educational service, the deed was not changed and the county required that the land use continue as “public.” There is both a current unmet need for public space (See [Livability22202’s Dec. 2023 Updated Priorities](#) requesting a School, Library, and Community Center) and the planned density for the area will require even more.

The studies done by the County have focused on the proposal by the applicant and have not reviewed alternatives that would potentially better serve both the residents and the County priorities for public space and biophilic increases. They have not considered the more than adequate availability of sites currently approved for higher density housing. On the contrary, the civic association analysis shows that, in addition to eliminating the public designation, the design will significantly decrease green space and mature tree canopy impacting the adjacent Nelly Custis Park.

Aurora Highlands has supported many units of affordable housing within its boundaries and AHCA is one of the civic associations with the most affordable housing in the County, with over 1,000 existing affordable housing units. AHCA has worked closely with the County and developers on another 700 units in the pipeline, including the Crystal House project which is just two blocks away from the site.