

February 11, 2016

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# VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS PARK PROPOSAL

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## RESTORING BALANCE IN HOW THE PARK IS USED

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*Children scaling the fence to play in green space of the locked-off softball fields.*

### SUMMARY

**Problem:** Virginia Highlands Park (VHP) is a popular and heavily used recreational facility that today is dominated by athletic space. The Pentagon City area, including Aurora Highlands, has insufficient park space to accommodate the broad constituency represented in our diverse and rapidly growing population.

**Solution:** To restore a balance to VHP by transforming the west side into a vibrant public park with creatively designed open green space that complements the existing recreational facilities on the east side.

**Opportunity:** Funding is already in place for design replacement of facilities on the west side of VHP, with construction anticipated in 2017-2018. If we do not act soon, the County is expected to allocate funds to redo the two softball fields on the west side of VHP. Now is the ideal time to ensure that CIP design funds are spent on redeveloping VHP to meet the current and future needs of Arlington residents.

## THE SITUATION

Virginia Highlands Park in Pentagon City is a heavily used recreational facility that today is dedicated primarily to athletic space. Incrementally, the commons has been lost to a multitude of specific uses over the last 30 years, severely limiting the open space left for socializing or unprogrammed recreation. With a dramatic rise in the neighborhood's density already underway, we need to rethink the way our limited parkland is used so that it benefits all Arlington residents.

## SOME FACTS ABOUT THE VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS NEIGHBORHOOD:

- Arlington as a whole has a population density of 8,332 persons per square mile.
- In 2010, the population of the Arlington Ridge and Aurora Highlands neighborhoods was about double the density of Arlington as a whole.
- Since 2010, the county population has increased by 4.4%.
- The 5,289 housing units being added (not including RiverHouse) will increase population in the Pentagon City area by about 8,000.
- Arlington Ridge and Aurora Highlands currently share 45.13 acres of parkland.
- One widely used measure of parkland accessibility is number of acres per 1,000 residents. While Arlington as a whole is on par with other major cities (7.9, compared with 7.7 for Boston, 7.9 for Baltimore, and 7.2 for Philadelphia), most of Arlington's parkland is not along the more urban corridors of Arlington (being either in north Arlington or Federal parkland). With projected density, the Pentagon City area will provide only 1.94 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.
- Green space on the RiverHouse property would be lost to new building under the owner's redevelopment proposal.
- In 2012 the County identified the neighborhood as one of six "Parkland and Open Space Future Need Areas."

## VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS PARK

Virginia Highlands Park (VHP) is an 18-acre park in the Pentagon City area of South Arlington. It sits at the border of two neighborhoods consisting largely of single-family housing and an urban core containing high-rise buildings, shopping centers, mid-rise residential units, and townhouses (see Fig. 1). It is the only park over two acres in size in South Arlington that is accessible by metrorail and within easy walking distance from the most heavily populated parts of the Pentagon City area.

The 2015 Capital Improvement Plan for the park added planned recreational facilities and increased pavement in former green space by over 16,000 square feet. VHP now consists largely of (1) a built environment, comprising a spray park, two playgrounds, one youth and two full basketball courts, six full and two half tennis courts, a restroom, parking lots, two covered shelters, paved walkways and seating areas, and (2) "unbuilt" space that is dedicated to sports: two soccer fields, two softball fields, and three petanque courts. The remainder consists of small wooded areas threaded among various facilities (see Figs. 1 and 4).

## The West Side of VHP

The west side of VHP, west of the synthetic soccer field to S. Joyce Street and north to the backyard of neighbors living along 16<sup>th</sup> Street is about 7.1 acres. Of this, about 3.75 acres are grassy areas. The remaining 3.35 acres consist largely of pockets of woodland interspersed with paths, petanque courts, picnic facilities, and a playground.

It is anticipated that if we do not take action on this proposal, the CIP for FY15-FY24 will allocate funds to redo the two softball fields in their entirety. Construction is anticipated to begin in FY 2017 and 2018.

## The Softball Fields

The two softball fields occupy 3.5 of the 3.75 acres of the grassy areas on the west side of VHP (see Fig. 5). These are reserved exclusively for play by paying league teams. For much of the year they are unused but locked and off limits to all Arlington residents, including the neighboring community (see Fig. 6). The county requires that 66% of the members of each team must either reside or work in Arlington county; no statistics are available on the number who are residents of the surrounding communities. The softball fields and their use create various challenges to residents living in the vicinity:

- **Limited Functionality:** The fields are completely off limits during inclement weather and from November to March to give grass time to recover.
- **Inaccessibility:** The fields are locked off from the community at all times to protect the high-maintenance surfaces.
- **Considerable Underutilization:** The fields are significantly underused relative to other facilities and especially to open space. Each field is used for approximately 600 hours per year out of a potential of 4,380 hours (12 hours a day), a total of less than 14% of the time.

## PROPOSED SOLUTION

Open green space is the most flexible type of parkland. It is multipurpose space where you can have a picnic on a blanket or throw a frisbee. Or sit on a bench in a garden to read. Or investigate what's blooming in the butterfly or herb/flower garden. Or sit in shade-covered benches, seats, or rocking chairs.

Our proposal is to restore a balance to VHP by redeveloping the west side of the park with creatively designed open green space that complements the existing extensive active-recreation areas on the east side. An imaginative re-envisioning of the west side will simultaneously correct green-space deficiencies and transform VHP into a vibrant public park with large-scale visual appeal and with the broadest possible constituency, a park that benefits all Arlington residents, merchants in the adjoining areas, and the county as a whole. The County has previously defined "Community Parks" as ones where the "developed features ... are balanced with intentionally undeveloped natural areas" and where "community gatherings" are desirable.

We have an opportunity with the Capital Improvement Plan to jumpstart this transformation. CIP Funds for FY15-FY24 will be allocated to make improvements to the west side of VHP. Construction is anticipated to begin in FY 2017 and 2018. Now is the ideal time to ensure CIP design funds are spent on redeveloping the west side of VHP to meet current and future needs.

## WHAT DO GREAT PUBLIC PARKS HAVE IN COMMON?

- They comprise both an outer park, with a lively pedestrian space abutting a commercial area, and an inner park with varied spaces.
- They are within walking distance for many residents and near transit for visitors.
- They have a large area of open green space with flexible use.
- Their layout and amenities benefit different groups of people using the park—active recreation, informal socializing, and being close to nature.
- They have lots of places to sit.
- Pathways provide connections with the outer commercial/pedestrian spaces and with the different areas of the park itself.
- They develop strategies to attract people during different seasons so that the park retains its function as a community asset all year long.
- They create attractions and destinations throughout the park: artfully placed amenities such as water features or sculptures act as focal points or artistic markers; gardens with seasonal variety maintain interest.
- They create an identity for the park and project an image for the residents.
- They make management of the park a key concern.
- They are funded and/or maintained by diverse funding sources.

# BENEFITS OF A REDESIGNED VHP PARK

## PARKS ARE ECONOMIC ENGINES

High-quality parks that do not cater to special interests spur economic development. They increase municipal revenues through their impact on property values and shopping revenue. They attract homebuyers and renters, and they retain and attract affluent retirees.

- **Attracting homebuyers:** Surveys have shown that 65% of people shopping for houses would be enticed to a community by parks, and almost half of residents surveyed said they would pay more to live near parks or greenways.
- **Increasing property values:** Parks can boost residential property values by as much as 15%, yielding greater wealth for residents and increased revenues for municipalities. In Washington, D.C. alone, residential properties within 500 feet of a park are worth almost \$24 billion; 5% of that value, or \$1.2 billion, is credited to parks.
- **Increasing municipal revenues:** Nearby parks spur not only property values but also commercial activity, providing more to the municipality through property tax and sales tax revenues.
- **Retaining and attracting affluent retirees:** Attractive, walkable environments with shopping and recreational activities nearby, in a moderate climate, are important considerations for active seniors and those who want to age in place.
- **Attracting knowledge workers to live and work:** Parks provide a sense of place, outdoor beauty, and recreational opportunities. These are key factors in retaining workers who are not tied to a particular location for their jobs.

## PARKS CREATE COMMUNITY COHESION

Great parks help build “social capital” not only by providing a community space but also by getting neighbors invested in their development and maintenance. They provide opportunities for diverse residents to come together for civic and environmental activities. Studies have shown that providing green common areas helps build and maintain stronger social ties. The County has highlighted community gatherings as a desired type of programming for its community parks.

Community cohesion is especially important for Arlington residents in areas like Pentagon City, which has a diverse mix of established, new, and transient residents. Our neighborhoods also have a growing number of seniors aging in place. A neighborhood initiative, 22202 Neighbors United (22202 NU), is now in its third year and its membership is expanding. Like many such organizations around the country, it is dedicated to providing services to neighbors to build a community that will support residents aging in place.

Social cohesion in VHP now is mainly through organized sports. The way that VHP has been developed and the fact that large areas are effectively off-limits to many residents, leaves VHP with limited opportunity for greater community cohesion among all parts of our population.

## PARKS REDUCE CRIME AND CREATE SAFER COMMUNITIES

Research shows that there is less crime in residential areas close to parks, in part because these green spaces are frequent gathering places for community members. The result is stronger community connections that empower residents to look out for one another.

## PARKS RECONNECT PEOPLE WITH THE NATURAL WORLD THROUGH SITE-BASED LEARNING

Parks offer people of all ages the opportunity to connect to the natural world. In our tech-heavy society, children and adults are spending increasingly more time indoors and on electronic media. Outside activity for many children is often programmed, and while this provides children with healthy exercise, it does little to promote interaction with the natural world around them. Even a small, well-designed park offers opportunities for exploration and for education about the natural environment.

## PARKS WITH GREEN SPACE HAVE HEALTH BENEFITS

Research has shown that, regardless of population density, children living in greener neighborhoods have a lower risk of obesity. Access to green space and natural areas is also associated with reduced stress and improved well-being.

## WHY THE WEST SIDE OF VHP IS AN IDEAL SITE FOR OPEN PARK SPACE

1. The park would be accessible to many more people of all ages and varied interests in being outdoors.
2. With the facilities for sports concentrated on the east side, this proposed redevelopment of the west side as open park space would bring the entirety of VHP back into a more appropriate balance of programmed and unprogrammed park space. Towards that end, it is critical that the tree buffer abutting the backyards of the neighbors on 16<sup>th</sup> Street South be left undisturbed.
3. Because it is centrally located in the area of South Arlington east of I-395, near an active commercial center, and within easy distance from Crystal City, it will foster greater interaction among all neighboring communities.
4. The activity along the park's periphery at Pentagon Row, Pentagon City, and the east side of the park will draw visitors into the park. Conversely, as a beautiful urban park next to the Pentagon City metro station, it will be a destination in itself, and visitors will in return support the neighboring businesses and retail establishments at the fringes.

## POTENTIAL DESIGN ELEMENTS

As illustrated in Appendix B, the following elements could be incorporated in the park design: open space for unprogrammed recreation; a civic lawn for socializing; zones with different features, such as gardens and seating areas; an outer park that integrates the Pentagon Row commercial area within the inner park; simple pathways to connect the zones; opportunities for site-based learning; and focal points, such as water features, artistic markers, and gardens.



## Appendix A

### VIRGINIA HIGHLANDS PARK AND SURROUNDINGS



FIGURE 1. Virginia Highlands Park 2000. The softball fields, upper left, were added in the mid-1980s.



FIGURE 2. Areas of the park infrastructure dedicated to specific uses. The large green semicircle and rectangle are the natural turf softball fields and soccer field, respectively. The smaller rectangles are playgrounds and a sand volleyball court. The yellow rectangle is an artificial turf soccer field. Areas in white are buildings and paved surfaces, including tennis and basketball courts and the spray ground. The unbuilt space that remains are all the small dark areas among these facilities. They consist mostly of small patches of woodland.





*FIGURE 3. Virginia Highlands Park prior to the most recent (2014-2015) CIP project.*



*FIGURE 4. East side of park after recent CIP showing new and previously existing hardscape.*



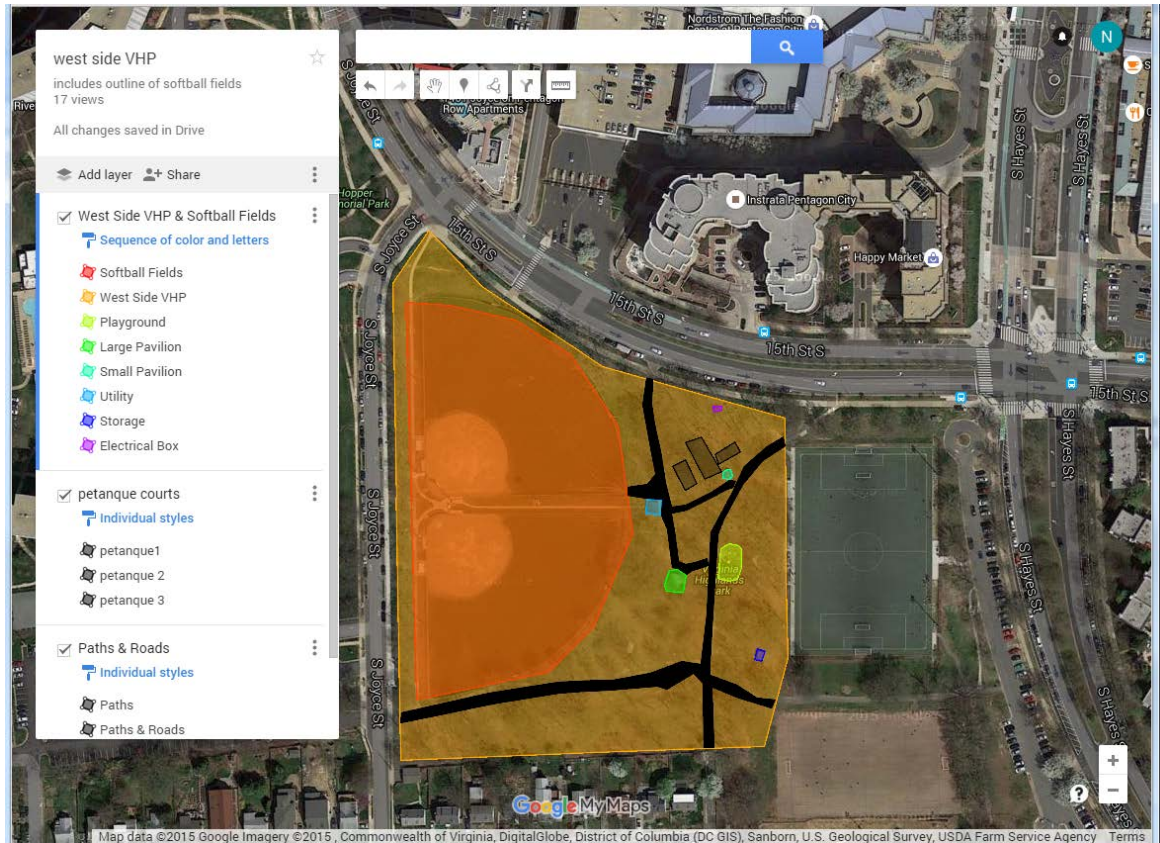


FIGURE 5. West side of park where 2016 CIP renovation is planned. Figure shows the extent of the exclusive-use softball fields as well as other infrastructure on the “unbuilt” spaces, largely woodland.



FIGURE 6. Sunny Sunday afternoon in November, 70 degrees. Fields are unused.



Figure 7. Density increases anticipated. Yellow areas are where housing units are being added. In addition to the privately owned green space at Grace Murray Hopper Park in the top left, there is additional privately owned green space on the property of the RiverHouse apartments. However, under the redevelopment proposal for the RiverHouse property, the owner plans to use much of that additional open space for a new building.



## APPENDIX B

### FEATURES THAT COULD BE INCORPORATED INTO PARK DESIGN

#### OPEN SPACE FOR UNPROGRAMMED RECREATION



*Grand Park, Los Angeles*



*Botanic gardens, Singapore*

#### OPPORTUNITIES FOR SITE-BASED LEARNING



*Grace Salmon Park, Westport, CT*



*Sully's Hill Preserve, ND*



## A CIVIC LAWN FOR SOCIALIZING



## ZONES WITH DIFFERENT FEATURES SUCH AS GARDENS AND SEATING AREAS



*Friendship Garden, U.S. National Arboretum*



*6BC Botanic Garden, NYC*



*West Side Community Garden, NYC*



## AN OUTER PARK THAT INTEGRATES NEARBY COMMERCIAL ZONES WITH THE INNER PARK

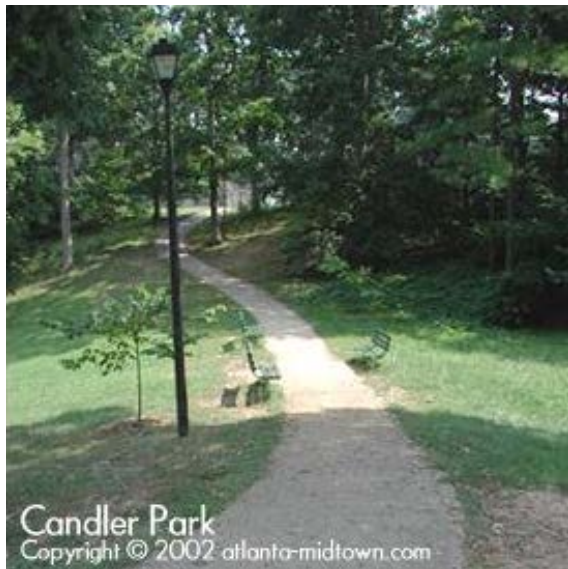


*Jackson Square, New Orleans*



*Washington Square Park, NYC*

## SIMPLE PATHWAYS TO CONNECT THE ZONES





## FOCAL POINTS: WATER FEATURE, ARTISTIC MARKER, AND/OR BUTTERFLY GARDEN



*Smithsonian Butterfly Habitat, Washington, DC*



*Living Water Garden, Chengdu, China*



*The Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park  
in Grand Rapids, MI*



*Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle, WA*

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