

Subject: Success of Hearts at Virginia Highlands Park open space pilot

From: "Scott Miles, AHCA President" <president@aurorahighlands.org>

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Dear Chair Garvey and Members of the County Board,

I would like to take a moment to share the fantastic community-initiated casual use effort at Virginia Highlands Park (VHP) in Aurora Highlands and enlist your support to help them continue and grow.

The effort has elicited over 50 letters of support from area residents for more permanent access to casual use space at VHP Adult Softball Field #3. These letters and a beautiful video can be seen at <http://bit.ly/heartsatVHP-feedback> and <https://bit.ly/heartsatVHP>.

With greater casual use access over the past five months supported by DPR and local stakeholders, the space has been used more heavily and continuously than ever before, helping support local restaurants, build a sense of shared community, and provide diverse and equitable access to all area residents.

As much as our community wants to see change and has shown we are willing to work for it, volunteer initiative alone is unsustainable. Progress can be made, and it can be done with relatively low effort and cost, but it can be sustained and grow only with the support of the County Board and DPR.

When we started Livability 22202, one of the first priorities voiced by the community was for "Open Space." The success of our February 2020 workshop proved just how popular this topic is, including specifically for VHP, Arlington's largest centrally located urban park.

What emerged from the workshop was a community consensus for a new long-term vision of the park, one that significantly increases multi-use, natural open space more suitable to the needs of the predominantly urban — and still growing — Pentagon City area. Many ideas emerged about interim pilot projects to begin implementing that transformation.

As the [video](#) eloquently shows, cancellation of organized sports in the spring allowed community members to put Livability concepts into action over the summer, transforming one of VHP's softball field spaces into a continuously used public space for art installations, social distancing meetups, and varied casual uses from kite flying, exercising, and families playing with their kids. Events and performances like Zumba classes and Music and Picnic in the Park on Saturdays have gathered over 80 people at a time, all safely distanced, even while other casual uses continue alongside.

All of this has been community-initiated, and dozens of new volunteers now help maintain the park for daily casual usage as well as organizing free activities. We have also engaged with other area stakeholders like JBG Smith, the BID, and area businesses, who have been very supportive. DPR has accommodated some of our activities by limiting field scheduling and providing field lighting with the shorter fall days. Support from JBG Smith has helped provide movable seating, which has been a huge hit with residents. With VHP in the new BID boundaries, we look forward to the BID being able to apply their expertise and take up the fantastic community building, placemaking, and event capabilities here that the community has shown can be performed safely. And recently, organizers for the County's senior programs have also reached out to collaborate on using this field open space.

The need for open space is permanent and growing. Displacement with MetPark construction will have residents seeking other space for at least the next several years. Thousands of planned or recently built residential units with no or minimal open space are beginning to fill up. Moreover, the ongoing pandemic finds neighbors seeking outdoor activity that complies with CDC guidelines for safe distances.

Although the long-term vision of a truly dynamic urban central park may be years in the offing, we have shown that pieces of it are already achievable. We will continue to engage with DPR, the BID, JBG Smith, and others to partner with the community to sustain and expand access to casual use space along with other related Livability goals. But ultimately the Board will need to weigh in on decisions such as reprioritizing programming that are necessary to maintain and build on this success.

We hope we can count on the support of the County Board as we continue to advance the community's vision of the park, and we would be delighted to talk with any of you at greater length about ideas for pilot programs while the future of the park evolves.

Sincerely,

Scott Miles

President, Aurora Highlands Civic Association

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cc:

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— Attachments: —

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