

Finding submitted by the Park and Recreation Commission Task Force Member

1) Transparent and full consideration of land availability, land value and project costs.

In Arlington, we cannot afford to assume that what is already public space has no value in the context of project budgeting or location of functional requirements. Regardless of current use or ownership, there is no free land resource in Arlington. Residents recognize this, even if methods used for project cost estimation do not.

Using parkland for new operational facilities does not reduce the cost of the facility. Doing so may allow a portion of a project cost to be hidden. But that cost is real to the county and its residents, in the form of lost park space, which itself has both quality of life value to residents and monetary value as property. The Public Spaces Master Plan calls for the addition of 30 acres of park/open spaces in the next decade. This would be a net increase, which means that losses must be offset against this total. Requirements and plans about how to meet them will need to be done with recognition of the inefficiency of reducing park acreage, while simultaneously seeking replacement of this rare commodity.

In the Reed School case, APS calculated a \$5.0 million project cost increase for the integrated building design, which has a smaller footprint and is taller than other, more horizontal, designs. This estimate was an erroneous portrayal, and did not represent a true cost increase. The condemnation of park space for other building designs, with wider footprints, represented a cost to the neighborhood and to the county in the loss of park space. Replacement of that park space through purchase of adjacent properties would have equaled the additional cost estimated for the integrated design. More likely, the loss would be permanent, since it is unlikely that adjacent, contiguous parcels would be available for purchase in the foreseeable future, particularly at prices the County would agree to pay. Since those costs were not attributed to the other design alternatives, the estimates for them were essentially “low-balled” by hiding the full cost of those options.

The convenience of conscripting open space should not overshadow the fundamental fact that it is still a payment from public coffers and is a shortsighted approach. The 26th/OD case now stands at a critical juncture with respect to this dilemma. Space is legitimately needed for efficient operational functions. However, the moderate gain in efficiency pales in comparison to the long-term loss of irreplaceable park space. The real costs of complex designs that permanently ruin a valued and valuable park must include both the loss of park space and the irretrievable destruction of the land it is on. These costs are measured in a quality of life degradation for several neighborhoods. They must also be compared to the cost of alternative means and locations for fulfilling the important and necessary operational functions in the northern portion of the county. Without this alternate view, we will suffer a serious case of buyer’s remorse in the near future.

2) The success of the task force process, and the value of being wrong for the right reasons.

As the Task Force process evolved, and members completed the fact-finding and familiarization portion of the exercise, there was general agreement that one way to optimize the integrated

solution was to consolidate operational functions. It seemed logical, and appeared to make sense as a way of saving park space. So, the Operations Subcommittee focused on that approach.

But a retrospective view of that working assumption is that it was wrong. Not that it was the wrong approach to developing options. But wrong in that the assumption did not include awareness that the space necessary for consolidated operations is unacceptably large and complex. The main culprit is the serious inefficiency of circulation space with all functions being co-located and many large vehicles needing access. Every option had 25-40% of the space devoted just to pavement for vehicles to drive in and around and out.

Equally problematic is the challenge presented by the topography, the size, and the shape of the park, all of which conspire to allow few good choices about how to configure the required functions. Despite the formidable talents of our planners, architects and engineers, the design possibilities have been disappointing. Any approach that begins with consolidation exaggerates the project cost, the risk to the environment, and the sacrifice of sustainable open spaces in the park.

We now know this because we have done it. This realization is not because our process was wrong. And, it is not because the staff and consultants didn't do a good job—they did. This is a clear case of success by failing. The initial configuration parameter to consolidate operational facilities make it impossible to have a reasonable solution in the context of this park. And we learned from seeing it displayed that it cannot work as we might have imagined, nor lead to any design that will make the primary users—the four neighborhoods—happy and without spending multiple millions on disguised complex structures. As one Task Force member mentioned during the final design vote discussion, we are supporting "...the best of the worst..." with our choice. By a vote of 12-2, the preferred option was selected, but it was not a selection of what is desired, just what was the most tolerable among several seriously flawed options.

So, we must consider two alternative approaches in order to gain perspective and allow for more optimal overall park design solutions. The first is that of compact, efficient, arrangements for operational functions without consolidating them. This should start with enhancing and improving the efficiency of the current operational footprints, while minimizing expansion of those footprints to achieve desired operational capability.

The second is to consider alternative, off-site, locations for some operational functions, to include temporary leaf storage and some winter storm functions. More and more meaningful data about current operations is necessary. But data on short and long-term costs of off-site options is also needed to allow comparisons of what can be gained and at what cost with different approaches. None of this was available to the Task Force because we did not expend resources on considerations outside the Charge. A broader definition of the 26th/OD solution options will also allow the County to consider more acceptable design scenarios, a reasonable and balanced definition of operational efficiency, the true value of park land, and the strategic costs and benefit profile of this unique parkland parcel.

Finding Submitted by the Urban Forestry Commission Task Force Member

Finding 1: The public cares deeply. Throughout the process, dozens of members of nearby civic associations jumped into the discussion, providing creative options that include: arrange to park on nearby paved areas; use changing facilities at nearby buildings, such as Langston; examine best practices of jurisdictions that no longer mulch leaves in the expensive, energy-intensive Arlington way; provide a cost-benefit analysis to assess the options for investing funds; explore other systems of loading salt, such as conveyor belts; consider efficiencies in terms of where population spikes are forecast.

Neighbors joined the January site walk-through and public forum and regularly attend Task Force meetings, often past 10:00 p.m. Their energy, passion, and wise suggestions reflect well on the County and should be appropriately taken into account.

Finding 2: Most staff and consultants who addressed the Task Force did not demonstrate a deep understanding of the benefits of the environment. They seemed to focus on short-term construction of facilities without considering medium- and long-term impacts on erosion, water quality, air quality, flooding, or mitigation of climate change. Rarely did we hear from DPR staff, and never from Urban Forestry. On one occasion, we did learn the bad news that new walking trails will add to impervious surface (which Arlington is increasing at the rate of at least nine acres per year).

26th/OD is located 1) on a precipitous hill, 2) at the edge of a Resource Protection Area (safeguarding RPAs is the backbone of the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Ordinance), and 3) at the trailhead of Donaldson Run that flows directly into the Potomac. Yet staff and consultants talk about massive soil disturbance as though it comes at no cost to the fragile environment of the parcel. The “Summary of Requested Criteria for Refined Concepts,” for example, casually lists percentages of disturbed land between 57% up to 81%. There is minimal appreciation of the impacts of balding the land at the site. I did hear side bar conversations about likely negative impacts of habitat loss on storm water runoff; the situation for runoff is already inadequate and deforesting the hillside risks major flooding. But such issues got short shrift.

Finding 3: Public works staff does not appear to rely on data-driven decision-making. Members of the Task Force and public repeatedly asked for basic data: number of days per year snow operations take place; number of snowstorms per year; amount of salt used year on year; meteorological trends and forecasts. If not data, on what does the department of public works base decisions and plans? During comment period at each meeting, residents asked “why” must the County expand operations? As of March 21, there is no answer. From the beginning, public works staff stood up and claimed *the public* wanted them to upscale storm operations; yet, at every meeting, those who *live* in the area asked, “What is the justification for your plans?” “We are not being represented.”

Observations on context: It is worrying that a lack of respect and reliance on data is part of a broader picture in which data collection and data-driven planning is not championed.

For example, Arlington does not have a tree inventory; how does staff budget and plan when they don't know their stock of trees? This is slowly being addressed, but it took tree advocates to highlight this gap.

Under pressure to provide the data, public works staff revealed in 2018 the amount of impervious surface in the county and its annual rate of increase. It's an alarming situation with implications for: energy use, given urban heat island effect; climate change; flooding; air quality; water quality; physical and mental health of residents of all ages; wildlife; and more. Yet County officials appear oblivious to what is happening around them. At a public meeting in March, 2019, an elected official gave the audience the figure of impervious surface that applies to 2001. Another example is an interview in a magazine in 2018 in which an elected official claims a rate of tree canopy increase for which no data exists (the county web site does not make the same claim, and a recent canopy survey--triggered by local advocates--shows double-digit tree loss in numerous civic associations across the County).