

IT MAY BE TIME TO RE-PURPOSE HOOK ROAD PARK

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PREFACE

Before presenting this treatise on the Reston Association's plans to "enhance" the Hook Road Park, some disclosure items need to be put on the table:

- I lived at 11427 Hook Road for 7 years, directly across from the children's playing fields that also serves as beautiful and peaceful open space most of the week.
- I am a known advocate for open spaces in Reston. I am a Director at Rescue Reston, whose main charge is to save the Reston National Golf Course from re-zoning. I was an early and strong advocate for the Reclaim Reston group that is battling to keep the St. Johns Wood area from a developer's abomination. I am a strong advocate for maintaining open spaces and looking at future Reston development "from 30,000 feet." I believe we need to be clearer about what we DO want Reston to look like, as much as we are so diligently fighting against what we DO NOT want it to look like.
- I believe more parks like the current Hook Road facility are needed in Reston, especially with the massive development proposals flooding the area. So much of the current discussion regarding open space is directed at athletic fields, not parks.

BACKGROUND

The Reston Association periodically reviews the need for "capital projects" and this generally takes the form of a regular "rotational" review throughout Reston. The Hook Road Park facility is "up for review", and substantial preliminary work has been done to study ways to "enhance and improve" the existing facility.

The Reston Association staff has made several detailed proposals to allocate future funds for such "enhancements", and with the budget to be reviewed and approved in the next few months, this issue is front and center.

On Monday, August 7, 2017, there will be a detailed discussion and review of this project at the Reston Association. The public is invited, and the important meeting will begin at 6:30 pm. I strongly encouraged all interested parties, particularly affected parties, to attend and speak out at this meeting.

CURRENT PROPOSALS, AND DIRECTION THEY APPEAR TO BE HEADED

The point will be made that there have been no decisions made pertaining to the "enhancement" of Hook Road Park. There will likely be Working Groups established, and "community input" sought. This is a similar pattern followed on other Reston projects, and a process which has been suboptimal in almost all cases.

I am reminded of the old golfer's adage that, "the results of the match are determined on the first tee." For those non-golfers, what this means is that the number of handicapped strokes

granted before the match on the first tee often determine the outcome of the subsequent match regardless of the players' abilities. So negotiating strokes effectively before the game is even played can be as important as how you actually play the game.

In this case, the basic structure of any surveys (rarely accurate nor effective in Reston), the determination of who gets surveyed, the choice of "consultants" or "advisors", and so many other preliminary items will steer the results in a general direction that may guarantee a costly and suboptimal result.

As an RA Board member whose main concern is the application of common sense and the long term best interests of the community, I intend to fight for the residents and future ambiance/environmental interests of the communities.

CURRENT THINKING IS LOCKED IN A CAGE; THE FUTURE OF THIS INCREDIBLY VALUABLE PIECE OF LAND NEEDS TO BE EXAMINED MUCH MORE THOROUGHLY

Thanks in some part to the many questions and some objections I have had regarding obvious plans some people have for Hook Road Park, the process has slowed down and there is a general agreement to widen the scope of the staff study. As with other projects, the scope is not wide enough.

Hook Road is currently divided roughly in half, as follows:

- The western half is an open field, used mainly by young children to play organized baseball or soccer. These games involve the youngest of kids, not the competitive levels of older kids' soccer and Little League, or that of "select" leagues. Many parents attend, and there is no need for fancy field backstops and constantly pure lining of sidelines. During the evenings and all week, this area serves as wonderful open space for picnics, kite flying, frisbee with the dogs, exercise for younger supervised tots, and much more. In other words, a valuable community park serving a valuable purpose that cannot be stated in dollars.
- The eastern half of Hook Road Park is another story. There are four tennis courts that are lit at night. There is amazingly little use of these courts during most of the year, as I have often documented. There is also no check that I can ever decipher that the few people playing there are actually Reston residents paying for the privilege. Alongside the tennis courts is a practice tennis wall, another wasted space rarely used. There is also a paved basketball court. This is almost never used. The park on the right side is bordered and shaded by old, beautiful mature trees around its perimeter

Current proposals are all centered on the degree to which the tennis courts need to be renovated, including expensive lighting changes that will likely add significant lighting to courts that are rarely used, and which already throw off light for too many hours at night for those living in the immediate area.

Also proposed are expensive and unnecessary changes to the baseball backstops, and all sorts of ideas about adding rest room facilities and parking lots.

I would propose that even if Reston could accomplish these things gratis, we would be better off not having them done. But it will not be anything close to gratis, and if past experience is any guide, once working groups and consultants grab hold of this, the “estimated costs” will skyrocket and approved in future budgets. I say, “Enough is enough.”

HOW AND WHY WE SHOULD RE-DIRECT OUR THINKING AND SEEK TO RE-PURPOSE HOOK ROAD PARK

A great man once said, “Many see things the way they are and ask ‘why’; I see things as they can be and ask ‘why not?’” In Reston, it seems that developers can make any proposal they want through County zoning and few people blink an eye. We look at some of the most far-flung and absurd proposals to redevelop Reston and rape much of our valued open space, and few people stop to consider the magnitude and negative implications of it all. Yet if a citizen or small citizen group makes a slight re-purposing proposal to greatly enhance our environment and quality of life, they may be accused of being a local Che Guevera. It is time we instituted common sense and community service into our proceedings. Break out of the mental cage.

This “renovation” of Hook Road Park is simply the result of it being the next in an arbitrary rotation of projects that RA reviews each year. It is time to take it out of the rotation and have this facility reviewed by Parks and Recreation with the emphasis on parks, not some athletic fields. For all the talk around Reston of the importance of open spaces and the environment, the truth is that we have a very small supply of true parks and natural areas conducive to large swaths of neighborhoods being able to enjoy and mingle. There should be two or more Hook Road-style parks in Reston, not fewer.

I propose an examination of other sites in Reston that could house a park styled in a similar manner. This would clearly benefit the community in multiple ways.

Let’s summarize why merely “enhancing” the current footprint of Hook Road Park is a folly:

- The expense to take on any project proposed will be exorbitant at a time when Restonians are reeling from higher assessments, and while major overruns on similar Working Group projects have spiraled out of control. Enough.
- The open park space on the western half of Hook Road serves a valuable purpose *as is*. Brown Chapel fields are close to this location. Other manicured baseball fields and huge soccer areas are nearby. The North Side of town, in particular, has a surfeit of well manicured fields designed for competitive sports play. Hook Road Park appeals to the youngest element, with plenty of space for parents and friends to pull up folding chairs and enjoy the day. It works perfectly as is, and there is no need for “upgraded backstops” or any other such things. Most of the baseball games are either tee ball or coach pitch anyway.
- The western half of Hook Road Park is an oasis for the community during the week, and on weekends when the kids are not playing ball. Where else can people of all ages enjoy playing with their kids, engaging in a frisbee game with their dogs, strolling alone or with friends while lost in casual thought? Perhaps a few well-placed park benches may “enhance” this area, but I can think of little else.
- It is on the eastern half of Hook Road Park that the re-purposing needs to be given serious thought.

THE EAST SIDE OF HOOK ROAD PARK IS WHERE THE MAJOR RE-PURPOSING MAKES SENSE

There has been endless discussion on how to improve the tennis courts and tennis court lighting without spending a fortune.. The assumption has always been on how extravagant to get, not whether or not this needs to be done. Let me be the first: it does not need to be done.

First, the tennis courts. Reston has a surplus of tennis courts, and the Hook Road tennis courts are rarely used. Of those using the courts, id's are never checked. The lights shine deep into the evening virtually all year. Why?

When it is too cold to allow for night tennis at least four months out of the year, why on earth would we feel the need to spend a great deal of money on improved lighting, particularly when we have much unused capacity of courts close by?

What is the utilities costs to Reston of having these lights on perpetually, all year round?

What is the cost per round for the tennis that IS played on Hook Road? Why are we spending so much?

Given the stated need for more parking at Hook Road, any thought of paving land for this purpose would be a disaster aesthetically and environmentally. The Hook Road tennis courts are already paved. Wouldn't this be a natural spot for the necessary increased parking?

The virtually unused basketball court (already paved) in the center of the east side: why?

The practice tennis wall, virtually unused (also paved): Why?

All of this territory can be beautifully re-purposed at minimal expense, and likely less upkeep. Furthermore, my proposal could draw heavily from private donations, whereas none of the retrofit projects to keep Hook Road as is would do so.

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE AS THE LIFE BLOOD OF ANY CITY

Bob Simon recognized this basic fact in our original Master Plan with his concept for Village Centers. Unfortunately, the Village Centers gave way to strip shopping centers, leaving Reston woefully short of parks and community gathering areas.

Hook Road can be an outstanding venue for this purpose.

In cities I have visited, parks are at the center of valued public property. Citizens would go ballistic at the thought of re-zoning Central Park in New York or Stanley Park in Vancouver, for example. And in both these cities, and most others, the city is dotted with all sorts of smaller community parks that serve a vital purpose to the local communities.

Hook Road Park should not be just another recreational area with ball fields, tennis courts, and strict organized activity. We have enough of that. The park has huge potential to look more like Dumbarton Oaks in D.C., for example. Or any number of botanical gardens that dot other cities and towns. This can easily be accomplished and would serve the needs of many more citizens. It would give many more people who do not use the tennis courts (the overwhelming majority of Restonians) a reason to think their assessments DO provide value. It clearly is environmentally robust.

But more than just this: ***At a time when Reston is literally fighting for its life against the seemingly insurmountable development forces, the establishment of such a park stakes a claim that we value our quality of life, and the citizens want to define how our community should look. There should be a Hook Road Park in Hunters Woods. There should be a Hook Road Park in the South Lakes District.***

Currently, we are battling developers to establish minimal ball fields within the TSA proposed projects, and getting massive resistance. There is even talk of putting athletic facilities on roofs of buildings, so as not to leave valuable space undeveloped. What space we do have is forever under threat of being developed, the most egregious and obvious being the Reston National Golf Course.

The Hook Road Park proposed redevelopment project is a golden opportunity for the citizens to call for a time out and demand that we re-think the entire purpose of the park.

There are many great minds in the community who can develop concepts that are much more environmentally sound and provide much greater value to the community than spending huge money to simply create a “new and improved” Hook Road Park using the exact same footprint.

I call on those who understand this concept to work with us to create ideas on how Hook Road Park can be re-purposed. And while we are at it, how we can have similar facilities in other areas of Reston that are currently less-served than the area around Hook Road.

We need more parks; we need more open space.

Groups like IPAR, Friends of Reston, and independent thinkers and smaller groups dedicated to a better life style should all understand the concept and be chomping at the bit to offer recommendations.

Rather than forge forward with the current debate on how to retrofit the existing structures at Hook Road, isn't it time to take a “30,000 foot view” and determine what type of park best meets the needs of the overall community?

Let THIS bigger debate begin now. For the time being, the current Hook Road proposals are best put on ice.