



**ARLINGTON COUNTY
PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION
SPORTS COMMISSION**
2100 CLARENDON BOULEVARD, SUITE 414
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA 22201



November 28, 2017

Mr. Charles Monfort, Chairman
Four Mile Run Valley Working Group

Dear Chairman Monfort,

The Park and Recreation Commission (PRC) and the Sports Commission (SC) have monitored and participated in the deliberations of the Four Mile Run Valley Working Group (4MRVWG) since its inception in April 2016. At the outset, we expected a process generating dynamic and innovative designs for the area plan and the park master plan that would fundamentally transform and improve the study area. While the group has engaged in extensive discussions and reviewed many plans over the last 18 months, we don't believe the group has yet realized the full potential of what is possible for this area, and given the late stage of the group's planning efforts, we are disappointed to realize that the final outcomes may not be as transformative as they could have been.

A key focus on the working group has been the two-block area west of Nelson Street. Indeed, we believe the group's focus on this area has been disproportionate and has diverted attention away from creatively planning the rest of the study area. Moreover, we are not convinced that an arts hub in these two blocks is appropriate for reasons we address in this letter, nor are we convinced that it can actually happen. Many important questions, particularly on financing, remain unaddressed.

Because of these issues, we believe the 4MRVWG runs a very real risk of missing the target altogether and doing a disservice to the County Board and residents. The Board may get a clear vision of what some members of the working group prefer for **a tiny portion of the study area**, but constituencies in the surrounding neighborhoods and in the parks, recreation, and sports communities already have challenged and rejected that vision. We believe this pushback will grow stronger and will eventually include a broader cross section of Arlington taxpayers. At the same time, the Board will not get a clear sense for what the working group envisions for **the rest of the study area**. As a result, two consequences are possible: (1) additional planning will be needed, which may or may not include community representatives, or (2) development in the Four Mile Run Valley will be solely market-driven and lack a cohesive and strategic orientation.

Long-Term Planning for Park Expansion

As the working group knows, long-standing and deliberate plans have been implemented over the past twenty years to acquire additional land near Jennie Dean Park **for the purpose of expanding the park to meet a range of county needs**. According to the 2017-2026 CIP, “over the past ten years, the County has strategically increased the park space at Jennie Dean Park through the assemblage of five new properties. The properties...will be developed as an important recreation, cultural and environmental resource to serve this vibrant area as recommended in the Public Spaces Master Plan.” Indeed, the 2005 Public Spaces Master Plan recognized the Four Mile Run Valley as one of the few remaining large tracts of open space in Arlington that could help address the “strong documented need for aquatics, fitness, teen center, arts and multi-purpose spaces, along with need for additional outdoor trails, fields and natural areas.” These needs, documented in 2005, have only increased.

In 2016, the County Board directed the 4MRVWG to develop a “Park Master Plan [that] will provide a vision for the comprehensive replacement and realignment of existing park features (exclusively for park purposes) and **the addition of new park amenities to meet the growing demand for active and passive recreation, cultural resources and natural resource preservation.**”

In addition, the working group received a range of public input during the December 2016 visioning session about expanding Jennie Dean Park to meet the growing need for casual use and recreational spaces.

The PRC and SC representatives to the 4MRVWG have expressed concern about and opposition to a movement within the working group that some of the acquired five parcels should be used exclusively for an arts hub instead of park expansion. We believe this singular focus ignores the clear intent of the CIP, the working group charge, and public input that the acquired parcels should be used to address a multiplicity of needs. In our opinion, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to increase recreational and casual use space opportunities at Jennie Dean Park for the near- and long-term benefit of neighbors and the overall community runs the risk of being squandered.

Concerns About a Possible Arts Hub and the Relationship to Park Bonds

The PRC and SC recognize that there is broad support for expanding cultural amenities in the 4MRV, and we support that expansion. However, we have many concerns about the concept of an arts hub as currently envisioned by the 4MRVWG:

1. Real estate acquired with park bond funds for the expansion of Jennie Dean Park should not be redirected toward an entirely different use from what was supported by taxpayers. Doing so violates public trust in using bonds as a means for financing specific types of projects.
2. We recognize that all of cultural resources, parks and recreation once fell under the former Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources (PRCR). We also recognize that arts and recreation are combined in many jurisdictions and we support integration of uses, where appropriate. However, when bond funds voted on by Arlington taxpayers and designated for park land acquisition have been redirected toward arts

purposes in the past, the results have not been positive; specifically, \$4 million of such funds were redirected to build out the Artisphere. We note that the arts were pulled out from PRCR after it became apparent that the Artisphere was financially unsustainable. We do not want to repeat a costly mistake.

3. Given the unfortunate experiences with the Artisphere, if the 4MRVWG intends to recommend that some of the parcels intended for the expansion of Jennie Dean Park should be similarly redirected toward an arts hub, it is imperative to be fully open and transparent with taxpayers about this plan and give them the opportunity to voice support or opposition.
4. It remains unclear how the proposed arts hub would be financed or managed over time to become self-sustaining. Before any acquired real estate is redirected in this manner, the full nature and extent of the county's financial commitment, including in-kind resources and other subsidies, to the arts groups located at 3700 S. Four Mile Run Drive should be fully transparent. Further, the full nature and extent of any future county financial commitment to an arts hub in the 4MRV should also be clearly defined. Many questions remain unaddressed by the 4MRVWG, including how such a hub would be financed, how such a hub would compete with or complement the growing arts hubs elsewhere in the county, and how such a hub might realistically develop in the 4MRV without dedicated county funding or in-kind resources.
5. More information needs to be made available on the usability of county-owned structures that might form the anchors for an arts hub. The working group does not know how long these buildings are expected to be functional in their current state, nor what level of funding would be needed to make them viable structures over the long term. Only once such information has been provided and analyzed can the working group make data-driven recommendations on how these buildings should be used, if at all, in the future. The PRC and SC object to reserving indefinitely the buildings and the associated parcels of land for uses other than the purpose for which they were purchased by the county (expansion of Jennie Dean Park), especially when we have no realistic estimate of the costs necessary to maintain and/or rebuild these structures.
6. The 4MRVWG also has not adequately addressed where an arts district could best be located geographically within the study area. For example, some residents have suggested that any arts district should be located close to existing commercial and entertainment amenities rather than immediately adjacent to Jennie Dean Park, while others favor locating an arts district closer to Nauck Town Square and Drew Model School, which has an arts focus. We believe the working group has an obligation to consider all potential areas and the potential benefits and drawbacks of various locations, rather than focus on one particular area that just happens to have a few county-owned properties within its boundaries or might be preferred by some for other reasons. Indeed, if taxpayers are going to be asked to provide financial support for a new arts hub, the lack of a comprehensive study and site selection would be irresponsible.

Requests/Recommendations

The PRC and SC believe that there are many interesting ways to integrate casual use, recreational and cultural spaces and activities in the Four Mile Run Valley. We recognize that there are a range of uses that need to be addressed, and we firmly support balanced allocation and multi-use facilities. However, we believe it is a mistake for the working group to continue along the current path without doing additional research, obtaining additional input, and developing a more varied set of design options for future planning.

We make the following requests/recommendations:

1. The working group should request specific information to help it understand the current financial commitment and support provided by the county to the arts groups using the building at 3700 Four Mile Run Drive. This information should address what groups are represented in the building, how they were selected, how long they have been present in the building, the nature and extent of their activities in the building (including number of hours present per week/month/year), their annual revenues and expenses, and what rent they pay for the facility and how that has changed over time.
2. The working group should identify desirable arts uses for other parts of the study area and should evaluate the viability of locating an arts hub in more than one part of the study area. This evaluation should include, among other things, the extent to which an arts focus in the Four Mile Run Valley complements or competes with other growing arts hubs around the county, including at Shirlington Village. The working group should also consider potential benefits and drawbacks of differing locations within the study area of an arts hub.
3. The working group should request specific information to help it understand the likely costs associated with rehabilitating the county-owned buildings that are proposed to serve as anchors for an arts hub west of Nelson Street.
4. The working group should develop more specific information on how an arts hub would be financed and the likely nature of the county's financial commitment over time.
5. Before the working group forwards any design plan to the County Board that repurposes real estate parcels that were acquired with park bond funds toward an arts hub, it should seek public input on this idea. This could be done by way of focus group meetings, meetings with civic associations and other interest groups, or other public fora.
6. Before the working group forwards any design plan to the County Board that repurposes real estate parcels that were acquired for park expansion towards an arts hub, it should identify other areas in the study area where a commensurate amount of park expansion could occur. This should include identifying specific properties that the county may wish to acquire for park expansion.
7. Given the very real possibility that, either for financial reasons or lack of taxpayer support, it is not feasible to move forward with an arts hub in the two blocks west of

Nelson Street, the working group should develop at least one design for the park planning area that incorporates all of the county-owned parcels into the expansion of Jennie Dean Park.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our views.

Sincerely,



Caroline Haynes, Chair
Park and Recreation Commission



Shirley Brothwell, Chair
Sports Commission

cc: Honorable Jay Fisette, County Board Chairman
Honorable John Vihstadt, County Board Member and 4MRVWG Liaison
Members, Four Mile Run Valley Working Group
Members, Planning Commission
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager
Claude Williamson, Director, Community Planning, Housing and Development
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation
Victor Hoskins, Director, Arlington Economic Development