March 31, 2017

Mayor Allison Silberberg
Vice Mayor Justin M. Wilson
Councilman Willie F. Bailey, Sr.
Councilman John Taylor Chapman
Councilman Timothy B. Lovain
Councilwoman Redella S. Pepper
Councilman Paul C. Smedberg

Park & Recreation Commission:
10 Year CIP Budget

Dear Mayor Silberberg and City Council Members:

The Parks and Recreation Commission ("The Commission") writes regarding the current proposed budget for the 10 year CIP. The Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities ("RCPA") is facing $27M in unfunded Capital Improvements over the next 10 years. It is clear that this department is taking on a significant burden of the budgetary constraints without regard for the future fiscal consequences.

In difficult economic times, it is easy to cut what seems like an amenity, but the Commission believes this strategy is short-sighted and ultimately fiscally irresponsible. The RCPA and the Commission based other recreation master plans around the implementation of the Aquatics Master Plan. Eliminating this plan will leave the City with a gaping hole of unmet recreational needs far into the future.

Close to a million dollars, and countless volunteer and staff hours have been spent to develop a fiscally responsible Aquatics Master Plan to minimally meet community aquatics needs. As you know, the current state of the City's pools is abysmal. Of those not permanently closed, all face catastrophic deterioration and require significant attention. Many will never re-open and, in the light of those circumstances, the Commission supported pursuit of a minimal aquatics plan to insure future cost recovery of facility construction and maintenance.
The two key pieces the Commission felt would both serve the community as a whole and allow for construction and maintenance cost recovery are the Therapeutic Pool at Nannie J. Lee Memorial Recreation Center and the renovation and expansion of Chinquapin Park Recreation & Aquatics Facility. Both are removed from the proposed budget.

With respect to the Therapeutic Pool, as the budget currently stands, the City Manager removed the $1.4M aquatics design planning funds from this year’s RCPA budget. As a result, RCPA cannot plan and accordingly cannot seek grants to fund the Therapeutic pool, a pool that would likely be primarily funded with outside resources. It is a significant loss to meeting the City’s aquatics demands particularly for senior citizens and those with special needs. In short: the proposed budget short changes our most vulnerable citizens and disregards the progress needed to obtain outside funding.

The proposed budget is equally catastrophic to Chinquapin. The renovation and expansion of Chinquapin is a critical piece to overall recreational services provided by the City. It is central to recreation as a whole in the City, not only in location but also in programming. As it stands now $15.3M is currently unfunded to complete the renovation. An additional, $8.1M, dedicated to the Open Space Master Plan was removed from the 10 year CIP and instead $7.5M was moved to the CFMP budget to maintain the aging Chinquapin physical plant. The Commission believes this is ill-advised and fiscally irresponsible. It is, once again, a decision to use a band-aid where surgery is required.

These funds, which could cover half of the renovation and expansion of Chinquapin, will only cover capital maintenance of the building and not the equipment/services that provide programmable, cost-recoverable services. There is unequivocally no chance to recover the $7.5M without renovation to the facility as a whole.

Without the planned renovation to this critical recreation facility, the Commission is further concerned about spending approximately $9M on the new Neighborhood Recreation Center at Patrick Henry ("PHRC"). PHRC was planned with the understanding that there would ultimately be a fully functional and renovated Chinquapin. A “neighborhood” recreation center like PHRC will not serve citywide programming needs like Chinquapin. Council’s Neighborhood Recreation Center model has made cost recovery for both the construction and programming prohibitive, which will only add to the burden of RPCA’s shrinking budget.

Additionally, removing the $8.1M from the Open Space Master Plan is short sighted, because land prices in our region continue to outpace inflation. The increased number of approved residential development projects in the City will only make it more difficult to satisfy the requirements set forth in the Open Space Master Plan.
The Commission understands that it is easy to strike out large line items. It is much more difficult to ask the City Manager and staff to re-evaluate the budget as a whole in order to make the best fiscally responsible decisions for the entire community. Rather than planning recreation as whole to meet community needs citywide, the City is falling into the continual trap of looking at recreation in a piecemeal fashion without concern for the significant service gaps and without an understanding of what is needed for a viable cost recovery policy. As the Cameron Run Park planning process continues, it is imperative Council understand that without these other recreation pieces in place, priorities at Cameron Run Park will shift significantly.

In an effort to refocus the City’s planning of recreational facility needs designed to meet a growing population while the Cameron Run planning process is underway, the Commission would like Council to consider the following three times:

1) Reinstall a portion of the proposed $1.4M aquatic design planning funds, in the amount of $400,000 to FY18 to do the following:
   a) Ask RPCA to re-engage the Hughes Group to develop a Therapeutic pool plan to be used to seek grants to fund the Therapeutic pool at Nannie J. Lee Memorial Recreation Center.
   b) Ask RPCA to reengage Kimley-Horn and/or Counsilman-Hunsaker, or engage the Hughes Group to revisit the Aquatics Master Plan in conjunction with the Cameron Run planning process to make further recommendations with this site in mind.

2) Reinstall the remaining $1M for aquatics planning in FY 2019 of the 10 year CIP based on the outcome of 1b.

3) Reinstall the Chinquapin renovation funding to the 10 year CIP beginning in FY 2021.

We believe these steps will get the recreation planning for the City as a whole back on track.

The Park and Recreation Commission would like to thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Gina Baum, District I Commissioner and Stephen Beggs, District II Commissioner on behalf of Jennifer Atkins, Chair, and Judy Coleman, Vice-Chair, and the Park and Recreation Commission

CC: Youth Sports, AAA Bill Rivers, M. Jinks, J. Spengler