

ALEXANDRIA PARK & RECREATION COMMISSION

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor & City Council

FROM: Alexandria Park and Recreation Commission

RE: Cameron Run Regional Park

You asked us to report to you regarding: (i) a potential forty-year lease extension for NOVA Parks and (ii) the highest and best use of Cameron Run Regional Park. This memorandum contains our factual findings and recommendations.

SUMMARY

The Park and Recreation Commission finds that the current lease is not in the best interests of the City of Alexandria. The limited seasonal use leaves the park unavailable for citizen use for the majority of the year and neither the lease nor the seasonal use provides revenue to the city. Alexandria is a geographically small city with a steadily growing population. We must make better use of the park and recreation space we have to ensure that we are serving the needs of all Alexandrians. Our list of recreation needs is long; our list of public recreational spaces is short. Because the lease is not in the public interest, the Commission recommends against an extension of the lease.

The Commission finds that the highest and best use of Cameron Run Regional Park is a recreational facility or complex that provides year-round active and passive uses where needs are currently unmet. This could include, but is not limited to, natural areas, walking trails, aquatics, indoor or outdoor fields, multi-use courts, and West End community gathering spaces.

In accord with this finding, the Commission recommends that Council and city staff make a plan for the future of this park, including planning for year-round uses in the short-, medium-, and long- term. To that end, the City can (and should) either plan to run the park itself or find better lease or public/private partnership terms under which the park can operate. We emphasize that any lease of this property must generate revenue for the city and must be limited in duration to allow maximum flexibility for changing uses over time. As the city continues to grow and develop and plans like the Eisenhower West, Eisenhower East, and Landmark plans come to fruition, so this park must change to better serve all citizens of Alexandria. The time to plan for the future of this site is now.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. BACKGROUND

Arlington, Fairfax, and Falls Church created the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority, now “NOVA Parks” in 1959 with the goal of protecting water sources, conserving open spaces, and providing passive recreation spaces. Alexandria joined the organization in the 1960s. As a member of the organization, Alexandria pays \$4.46 per resident per year (in 2016, \$664,058) to NOVA Parks to be a part of the organization and appoints two board members to the NOVA Parks Board.

Over time, NOVA Parks added to its conservation and passive recreation activities the operation of profit-making enterprises such as water parks and golf courses, but it is not a for-profit organization. Generally, NOVA Parks generally owns the land on which it operates its parks, either through acquisition or through donation. In Alexandria, NOVA Parks operates two sites. It owns Carlyle House, which it operates as a historic site. And it operates a waterpark, mini-golf course, and batting cages at Cameron Run Regional Park.

The City of Alexandria owns the land at Cameron Run. In 1981, the city and NOVA Parks entered into a 40-year lease allowing NOVA Parks to construct and operate the waterpark. Under the lease terms, NOVA Parks paid a nominal \$10 fee. That is the only money Alexandria obtained in exchange for allowing its land to be used in this manner. Public reports indicate that Cameron Run is the third highest grossing park in the NOVA Parks system, netting NOVA Parks more than \$700,000 from Cameron Run. Internal numbers appear somewhat higher.

In 2014, NOVA Parks initially approached the city asking for another 40 years in exchange for installing a new waterslide. The city rejected that proposal as well as a proposal that sought an extension in exchange for purchasing a historic property in Old Town. NOVA Parks continues to seek a 40-year lease.

Recognizing such a long lease of public land with a quasi-private use for 40 years required significant analysis, the Council tasked the Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities Department to coordinate a public process to include public hearings before the Park and Recreation Commission. Council asked that the Commission advise it with respect to whether a 40-year lease would be advisable given the needs in the City and other potential uses of the land. Council wanted to know whether the current water park facility is the “highest and best” use of the land given that the City’s circumstances in 2017 are significantly different than they were in 1981. Council asked for findings, advice, and recommendations from the Commission as to the highest and best use of the site. Council did not ask the Commission to opine on the advisability of continuing to be a member of NOVA Parks.

Accordingly, the Commission presents the following findings and recommendations:

II. THE COMMISSION'S FINDINGS

Having considered the submissions by City staff, the consultant Michael Baker, NOVA Parks, the Eisenhower Partnership, the Alexandria Soccer Association, public comments from various neighborhood groups, public comments at the hearings and in writing, and other information bearing on current needs for recreation, parks, and cultural activities in the City, the Commission determined as follows:

1. Maintaining the current use of the park is not the highest and best use of the site for the citizens of Alexandria.
2. The terms of the current lease with NOVA Parks are not in the public interest of the citizens of Alexandria, for a variety of reasons, in particular: (a) the lack of meaningful financial compensation to the City through rent or revenue sharing or rebates on the City's annual per capita contribution to NOVA Parks, (b) lack of proper enforcement mechanisms for maintenance issues, (c) a term exceeding 20 years, (d) lack of requirements or provisions addressing off-season use.
3. The lack of a citywide recreational facility on the West End is a barrier to growth and has led to numerous controversies in the context of planning other sites, such as the Patrick Henry recreation center and Hensley Park.
4. The seasonal-only use of the park deprives city residents of the use of open space and leaves the area unattractive and unused for the majority of the year.
5. There are significant maintenance issues with the park, both with the water park and with respect to the areas adjacent to residential areas, creating unsightly and potentially dangerous conditions for area residents and damaging the natural areas.
6. The lack of accountability in the lease terms has left citizen concerns ignored and unaddressed with very little recourse for citizens.
7. The lack of accountability in the lease terms has left the city with very little recourse to ensure the appropriate care and maintenance of the park.
8. Based on communications received by the Commission it appears that the majority of users and vocal supporters of the current amenities are not residents of the City of Alexandria.
9. There is significant development coming to the area that will radically change the nature of the area, as evidenced in the Eisenhower West and Eisenhower East development plans.
10. There is significant need in the city for recreational uses such as nature trails and aquatics facilities that could be provided at Cameron Run.

11. Even citizens who enjoy the current facilities are open to changes in the use, so long as the park is well maintained.
12. The space is ideally suited for a large-scale recreation facility with a citywide scope (e.g., an aquatics center or indoor/outdoor sports and recreation facility). Such a facility could be both resident serving and revenue generating.
13. The City has significant short-term financial constraints given other important infrastructure projects in the next ten years.
14. The highest and best use of the site would be a recreational facility (or complex), citywide in scope, to address currently unmet needs of Alexandria residents, for example, where the city currently lacks facilities or facilities of sufficient size or amenities to serve the existing needs of its residents (including but not limited to aquatics, indoor or outdoor fields, multi-use courts, West End community gathering spaces, for example).
15. The highest and best use of the site would allow for year-round use, whether indoor or outdoor and would serve both the immediate neighborhood and the city as a whole.
16. The highest and best use of the site would, consistent with the RPA, retain un-programmed open and natural spaces, and contain improved connections and trails.
17. The highest and best use of the site would be a facility designed and operated consistent with anticipated development under the Eisenhower West Small Area Plan, taking into account population growth, demographics, connectivity, and neighborhood character.
18. The highest and best use of the site does not necessarily require direct City management but could involve management or concessions under contract with entities to ensure efficiency and avoid undue burden on staff.
19. A transition from the Cameron Run Regional Park to a citywide recreational facility if not implemented smoothly, could result in unsafe and unsightly conditions from non-use.
20. Demolition of the existing Cameron Run Regional Park facilities - water park, batting cage, mini golf - will impose significant costs upon the City if and when it occurs.
21. Alternate funding options for Park facility demolition may be available, such as public-private partnerships and developer proffers coming from Eisenhower West, Landmark, Eisenhower East - or other areas of the city.
22. In the short term, off-season uses of the current NOVA Parks facilities could include festivals, food truck rodeos, holiday markets, farmer's markets, temporary ice rinks, temporary basketball or multi-use courts

etc. These uses would activate the site, build community, and possibly generate revenue for the city that could be invested back into the park.

III. THE COMMISSION'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Based upon these findings, the Commission makes the following general recommendations:

1. City Council should take affirmative legislative action immediately to recognize the current Cameron Run site as the future location of a Citywide (as opposed to neighborhood) recreational facility or complex, regardless of any action as to the NOVA Parks lease.
2. City Council should not entertain the proposed 40-year lease extension.
3. City Council and staff should consider and plan for an interim condition in the next ten years. In doing so, the City Council should provide for dedicated revenue and funding streams to fund the transformation of the park.
4. The interim condition should include temporary uses that can activate the space and provide revenue that can be invested in the park. All revenue to the city generated by any use of the park should be reinvested into the transformation of the park.
5. City staff should continue to seek public/private partnerships and developer contributions to support the transformation of the park.
6. If the interim condition includes any lease extension, lease renewal, or new lease with NOVA Parks or any other park operator, the agreement should contain express provisions to facilitate the transition to a citywide recreational facility, and to ensure that this transition occurs within the next ten years.
7. Any lease extension, lease renewal, or new lease with NOVA Parks or any other park operator should be subject to rigorous public review at an early stage to ensure it is in the public interest of the citizens of Alexandria, in particular with respect to financial provisions, enforcement, length of lease term, and off-season uses.