

MEETING SUMMARY

Fort Ward Park Capital Project Updates

Wednesday, December 11, 2019

7:00 – 8:30 p.m.

St. Stephens and St. Agnes Middle School

4401 West Braddock Road

City Staff & Consultants Present

- Jack Browand, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
- Judy Lo, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
- Bob Williams, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
- Bethany Znidersic, Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities
- Garrett Fesler, Office of Historic Alexandria Archaeology
- Susan Cumbey, Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site
- Brian Briones, Fort Ward Museum and Historic Site
- Elisabeth Lardner, Lardner/Klein Landscape Architects
- Cara Smith, Lardner/Klein Landscape Architects

Presentation

Staff and consultants presented updates on upcoming capital projects at Fort Ward Park.

Projects are recommended in the 2015 Fort Ward Management Plan and the 2019 Interpretative Plan.

Presentation Slides

Fort Ward Park and Museum Area Management Plan

- Ms. Lo provided a brief overview of the plan's purpose, intent, and goals.
- Ms. Lo provided an overview of the Ground Disturbing Protocols intended to preserve and protect the site's resources.
- Ms. Lo provided an overview of completed projects since 2015 including: repaving of the loop road, removal of the dog exercise area, tree plantings, accessibility improvements to picnic areas, drainage improvements to the Oakland Baptist Cemetery, restoration of the former maintenance yard, including removal of sheds and greenhouse, establishment of low mow areas to improve drainage and reduce disturbance from maintenance operations, and completion of the Interpretive Plan.

Archaeology

- Mr. Fesler gave an overview of investigations completed since 2008. Over 1,000 test holes were dug, and over 6,000 artifacts were collected. Shovel tests are done to subsoil (roughly 10-14 inches at Fort Ward).
- Any new infrastructure must be coordinated to avoid resources whenever possible. The City's approach to Fort Ward Park is 'Preserve and protect archeological resources in place.' Excavation is a last resort.

- The entirety of the site is considered a resource.
- The community is encouraged to join and participate in the oral history opportunity of the “Fort Community”.

Capital Projects Overview:

- Ms. Lo provided an overview of project funding and project requirements, such as ADA compliance and archeological investigations.
- A community member asked if there is funding for tree planting. Ms. Lo responded, past projects have included investments for tree planting (\$75,000), with a three-year watering warranty, to ensure trees are watered during establishment.
- Capital funding is approved biannually.

Capital Projects: ADA Parking Improvements

- Ms. Lo presented the project slides. The project addresses vehicular parking lots that are not compliant with the American with Disabilities Act. Five parking areas are not compliant, including the gravel lot at the front entrance. Parking component colors, such as wheel stops, and striping will be an historically appropriate color (neutral colors, no bright colors i.e. yellow).

Capital Projects: Picnic Shelter Accessible Route

- Ms. Smith presented the project slides. A new accessible path will connect the picnic shelter to ADA parking spaces.
- A new landscape island will be created by merging the two existing parking areas, and adding three new parking spaces, and two ADA parking spaces. A tree will be planted in the island.
- One tree may be affected by construction of the path. Further design and engineering will be done to see if the tree can be preserved.
- A community member asked for clarification on project schedule. Ms. Lo responded the project will be under design in Winter 2020 (January- March 2020)
- A community member asked if the trail would be permanent and what material it will be. Ms. Smith responded the surface will be a permanent, permeable surface, possibly pavers or porous asphalt. Ms. Cumbey also commented that use of surfacing that is like the Fort/Bastion is not recommended.

Capital Projects: Van Dorn Street Pedestrian Access

- Ms. Lo presented the project slides. The project improves pedestrian access to the park from Van Dorn Street (the north side of the park). Currently, pedestrian access is not well formalized on the northside of the park.
- An existing wood chip nature path will be improved. The trail will be resurfaced with new wood chips, the existing steps will be replaced, and a new bench added.
- Another pedestrian entrance point is proposed further west, near the picnic shelter, that will be ADA accessible. This area has not been designed and may require removal of one or two trees.

- A community member asked why two different paths are needed. Ms. Lo responded, the soft nature trail has steps and is surfaced with woodchips, and steep topography not easily reconfigured to be accessible. To make the nature trail ADA accessible would likely have significant impacts to trees. The other path will provide ADA accessibility; it is also located adjacent to an existing ADA curb ramp and crosswalk.
- Ms. Cumbey also explained new trail(s) connectors also allow the City to better protect and limit or eliminate the existing use of the rifle trench as a path access from Van Dorn into the park. A meeting attendee also commented, two access points will better serve residents that live in that vicinity. Standard park regulations signs will be posted at each entry point.

Capital Projects: Playground Relocation

- Ms. Smith presented the project slides. The playground will be relocated from its current location to Area 5 (near the restrooms and the amphitheater).
- A community member asked why the playground must be moved. Ms. Lo responded to improve accessibility for the community. Currently the existing playground is located at the bottom of a steep hill and playground mulch washes away. Providing access would mean constructing an extensive ramp system going down the hill, that would be costly and unsightly.
- A community member expressed the need for more substantial efforts to mitigate erosion when moving the playground. Ms. Lo responded the area will be monitored after the playground is moved. Mediation may include erosion control through light grading, and establishment groundcovers such as meadows and planting trees. If there is a greater issue, then an engineer may be needed to determine if the erosion is (point source) and requires other means of control.
- Arlington Alexandria Tree Stewards, in attendance expressed interest in planting trees in the park and made the following comments:
 - The new construction at Episcopal High School across Braddock Road resulted in removal/clear cut of stands of mature native trees.
 - Fort Ward historically has been the City's arboretum (with exception made to invasive trees that have been planted in the past – do not preserve them); the park has several of the City's Champion trees.
 - This seems like the time to be thinking about planting trees; particularly native species.
 - There is strength in the trees on-site—plant more trees; trees will help with site erosion; Fort Ward already has the highest or one of the highest diversity of species in the City.
 - Neighbors may be interested in funding and/or planting additional trees, particularly on east edge of park where existing playground is located.
- Mr. Williams commented that the City has interest in planting more trees and has done so since the 2015 Management Plan adoption by Council.
- Mr. Browand responded that the City also has a separate planting program that could provide funds for tree planting in the park as well as its use for street trees.

- A community member asked how much funding has been used to plant trees. Ms. Lo responded \$75,000. There is an opportunity to plant trees at the site of the current playground.
- A community member commented that it took eleven years of active [public] participation to bring the park's complicated nature to the City's attention. City departments had been operating in silos and there was neglect of the park's resources. Ms. Lo responded that the City is operating under an interdepartmental MOU for park management, and that interagency meetings are held quarterly. Interdepartmental efforts have been moving projects forward, though they take time to complete.
- Ms. Smith presented two approaches for addressing the cultural resources at the new playground location. One approach is to elevate the playground preserving the resources in place. The other option is to build at grade, and to monitor excavation and recover objects from excavation.
- A community member asked what an "elevated" playground is. Ms. Smith responded adding soil/berms and retaining walls to contain soil allows for an approach to minimal disturbance to archaeological resources. The safety surface requires a base of engineered wood fiber or rubber and a subbase, and there are deep footers for the playground equipment.
- Mr. Fessler explained the elevated approach is best for preserving resources in place. Building at grade would require significant investigation of all excavated materials.
- A community member asked if excavation would also increase the construction time. Mr. Fessler responded it would most likely. It is assumed that elevating the playground would require significantly less archeological investigation.
- A community member asked why the City would not elevate the playground. Ms. Lardner commented that the cost is being investigated. There is significant infrastructure below grade, whether the playground is elevated or not.
- A community member asked if elevating the playground would require retaining walls and fencing. Ms. Smith responded the design may require walls and they are working to avoid railings.
- A community member commented that there might be issues with the playground located close to drop off zones at St. Stephens and St. Agnes School. A community member asked if the playground will be fenced. Ms. Lo responded the City is looking at options for barriers such as vegetation or fence.
- A community member asked if the playground will be bigger and if there will be more equipment. Ms. Smith responded it would be ideal to add pieces for multiple age groups.
- A community member commented to consider adding less equipment, since the park is very natural.
- Mr. Browand commented that nature play such as berms, willow tunnels, and natural materials could be considered as an alternative to traditional play structures.
- A community member commented natural play features would be great.
- A community member commented that one of the reasons for relocating the playground is its proximity to the amphitheater, so that parents can enjoy a performance while watching their kids. It would be great to add a play feature to the amphitheater.

- A community member asked if all the existing equipment will be removed. Ms. Smith responded that all equipment will be removed, but not all pieces will be reinstalled.
- An additional community meeting will be scheduled in January/February to present the playground designs.

Capital Projects: Fort Ward Interpretive Plan

- Ms. Cumbey presented the project slides and provided an overview of the Interpretive Plan process, and the status of proposed projects for implementation that have been identified by the Interpretive Plan committee in conjunction with Historic Alexandria staff and consultants. She explained that the goal of proposed interpretive projects was a more cohesive and expanded approach to interpretation in Fort Ward Park, in accordance with recommendations in the Fort Ward Park Management Plan.
- A new Fort Ward brochure, entitled “Bastions of Freedom,” is being prepared for production and will be available in early 2020. The brochure provides a more complete introduction to the Park’s history from the Civil War period to the post-Civil War African American “Fort” community.
- A new permanent overview exhibit on Fort Ward’s Civil War and Fort community history will be developed in 2020-21.
- Two Park orientation stations will be installed in 2020-21 that will highlight the Park’s history and guide visitors to sites of historic interest. The stations will be in the vicinity of the Park kiosk in the Museum parking lot, and near the restroom building/amphitheater on the west side of the Park.
- Phase I of new historic site markers will be implemented in 2021, focused on replacing deteriorated interpretive markers in the Civil War fort.
- An Interpretive Soft Trail on the east side of the Park is a long-range and more large-scale project that will require phased planning and production, more public input, and a CIP request for FY2023. The interpretive trail will link several major proposed components of the “Fort” community’s history, including new and additional historic site markers that will be keyed to a mobile web site, an interpretive area for the African American school-house/chapel, and a commemorative area. The trail will also give interpretive context to existing burial sites such as Clara Adams grave site, the Old Graveyard, and Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery.

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