



MEETING REPORT

MEETING DATE: March 28, 2017

STAFF ATTENDING:

Michael Ma	M-NCPPC Park Development Division Chief
Patricia McManus	M-NCPPC Park Development Design Section Supervisor
Ching-Fang Chen	M-NCPPC Park Development Project Manager and Landscape Architect
Andrew Tsai	M-NCPPC Park Development Engineer
Dominic Quattrocchi	M-NCPPC Park Planner
Bill Tyler	M-NCPPC Southern Parks Division Chief
Mohammed Turay	M-NCPPC Park Manager
Alex Girr-Borrayo	M-NCPPC Public Affairs and Community Outreach Coordinator

PROJECT: Acorn Urban Park Renovation

SUBJECT: Community Meeting #1

Staff presented the project background, existing conditions and a preliminary program of requirements for the park. Jerry McCoy, President of the Silver Spring Historical Society, presented the history of the park. An overview of the process and schedule was also discussed. Approximately 28 people attended the meeting and provided input and ideas after the staff presentation.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION

A summary of the meeting discussion, as well as comments that were submitted before and after the meeting are included.

History

- The park and spring is a remnant of Francis Preston Blair's country estate "Silver Spring" named after his discovery in 1840 of a mica-speckled spring.
- Mr. Blair was influential in national politics advising several U.S. presidents. Many Washington luminaries visited Mr. Blair's country estate.
- There is a historic record of President Abraham Lincoln playing town ball at the estate. It is unique as being a place at which President Lincoln was said to be happy and relaxed (Abraham Lincoln in the National Capital by Allen C Clark, Press of W. F. Roberts Co. 1925)
- The Acorn gazebo may be the world's largest acorn. It was built to commemorate Mr. Blair's marriage proposal to his wife under an oak tree.

General Comments

- Additional open space is needed for the neighborhood in this highly-developed area of Silver Spring. There is no place for children to play or to walk dogs.
- Consider acquiring certain pieces of land nearby to increase the public park area. A large (40-acre) land holding by the Tower Companies was brought up as a possibility to provide public parkland or to have privately-owned public open space managed and programmed by the Department of Parks. Also consider purchasing the ExtraSpace Storage property at 8001 Newell Street to use as future park.
- Jesup Blair Local Park was mentioned as a large nearby park that provides ample opportunity for active recreation and children's play areas and can complement the use of Acorn Urban Park. There were comments that Jesup Blair park is difficult park to reach by foot, as Georgia Avenue is very busy and would need to be crossed. There was a suggestion to work with DOT and SHA to improve the pedestrian crossing of Georgia Avenue at several locations, in order to provide better access to this park.
- The community engagement process should be inclusive and engage families with small children, who may not have been able to attend this public meeting.
- Requests have been made for improvements to this park for ten years. A park with this much historical significance should be given more attention than it has been given and should be properly maintained into the future.
- There were questions whether staff was working with the adjacent property owner for the renovation of park.
- The Arts Walk between 8045 Newell and the County garage is sometimes used for games and gentle ball-playing by young parents.

Comments Regarding the Existing Park

- The park is not utilized enough and needs activation. There have been some festivals in the park and on Kennett Street in the past.
- Some like the park as it is, including the historic aspects of the park, and want the park to be maintained as a bucolic green oasis with no additional paving or impervious surfaces.
- The park is a good place for reading, sitting and strolling.
- The historic features have been compromised and need to be restored. Storm water is impacting the historic spring, the basin and granite inscription are covered with mud from rain events, and rocks are being thrown into the area which could damage the granite marker. Drainage issues need to be addressed, a new nymph should be provided in the grotto, and the water feature should be restored to working condition.
- The paved walk along the building is too wide and could be narrowed.
- Retain the murals on the building wall which depict the history of Silver Spring.
- The historical features are underrepresented, and educational opportunities are missing.
- Smoking restrictions should be enforced within the park.
- The community-dedicated dogwood tree and plaque need to be replaced.
- Maintenance and upkeep of trees should be a priority.
- Acorn Urban Park is a neighborhood jewel and amenity for the community. The community should be built around humanity, nature, and the history of this area, as opposed to the needs of cars and traffic flow.

Suggestions for Improvements to the Park

- The park has the potential to be a great heritage tourism spot. Focus on the history as a basis for additional development or programming of the park.

- The park needs to be activated and should engage a wide range of users. Festivals and events should be planned to promote the park.
- Retain green space that can accommodate the historic features while providing a neighborhood amenity for people without cars.
- Seating opportunities should be increased and improved throughout the park. Consider providing longer benches within the Acorn gazebo and built-in seating around the sunken grotto to allow people to sit around and focus attention on the grotto. An example of a circular bench at Dupont Circle was brought up. In addition, the benches along the wide sidewalk are facing the building wall and should be re-oriented to face the park. Make sure the seating is comfortable.
- Enhance connections to the surrounding parks and public open spaces that are part of private developments.
- Consider closing the adjacent section of Newell Street from East-West Highway to Kennett Street for special events or perhaps permanently to add additional usable space to this important park. A regular schedule of Sunday closings, May through October, could help make the park more visible and useful. Closing this section of Newell Street and expanding the park to incorporate the green space in front of the Argent Apartments could truly serve the neighborhood's needs while paying proper homage to the history of Silver Spring. It would be best if Newell were a permeable surface (grassy) and some of the fences were removed around the Argent Apartments to integrate the open space.
- Provide a comprehensive interpretation of the history of the park. Consider ways to highlight the significance of the Blair Mansion and Lincoln's visits. A statue of Lincoln playing town ball and bronze ground markings were mentioned.
- Look to integrate with DC on the historical presence and interpretation.
- Create space that can accommodate gentle ball playing and games.
- Create play opportunities by adding game tables or incorporating game patterns into the walk such as hopscotch or games with a historical focus.
- Protect existing significant trees. Plant more oak trees (with acorns) and some nice plants/landscaping in and around the stone grotto. Provide better access to the sunken grotto at the historic spring.
- Increase the visual presence of the park. Make the space feel bigger.
- Continue to search for the missing mill stone, and reinstall it.

NEXT STEPS:

- Investigate possibilities for closure of Newell Street and improvements to pedestrian crossings on Georgia Avenue.
- Develop concept alternatives based on the Preliminary Program of Requirements and community input.
- Meet with the community to review concept alternatives and obtain input.