

December 1, 2014 (*revised*)

TO: Arlington County Board

**FROM: Thomas Jefferson Site Evaluation Working Group
by Carrie Johnson, Chair**

RE Preliminary Report -- Thomas Jefferson Site Evaluation

The Thomas Jefferson Site Evaluation Working Group (TJWG) was created by the County Board in August 2014 in response to the School Board's designation of county-held land at the Thomas Jefferson park/community center/middle school site as the preferred location for a new elementary school. The TJWG is charged with evaluating the site and making a recommendation on whether or not an elementary school should be built on any part of the site.

The TJWG's 20 Board-appointed members represent various county advisory commissions, nearby civic associations, school-related groups and users of the site. Our charge emphasizes outreach and working collaboratively with the community and with county and Arlington Public Schools (APS) staff. Our final report is due in January 2015. This is a preliminary report in advance of our work session with the County Board on December 2, 2014.

A) PROCESS: The TJWG met seven times during the past three months. These meetings, all open to the public, included a walking tour and review of current uses of the site; APS staff presentations on elementary school capacity challenges, siting and design concepts, and transportation and parking; a community open house attended by at least 130 people, and lively group discussions. WG members and alternates have also reviewed substantial background information assembled by County staff, collected public comments, reported to their organizations, and solicited community input in several ways. (See attachment and the TJWG website for details.)

B) SUMMARY OF CURRENT POSITIONS: Having reviewed much information and worked diligently to build consensus, without taking votes, the TJWG reports as follows:

1) We have read our charge as asking both whether a new elementary school could be added to the site in keeping with the stated County goals for the site¹, and whether in broader policy contexts a new school should be built at Jefferson right now.

2) We have been constrained by a very short deadline, the focus on a single site that is already well utilized, and the lack of any framework of long-term public facilities plans. Our research is not complete.

¹ Those goals include retaining the wooded eastern end of TJ Park as is; ensuring no significant loss of green space and no net loss of recreational programming; maintaining a cohesive park; giving adequate consideration to neighborhood impacts of traffic and parking; enhancing safety for pedestrians and cyclists; keeping the community center available for use, and ensuring building massing compatible with the adjacent neighborhood.

In particular, we have not yet had time to evaluate transportation issues and options in detail. Despite several requests, we have gotten no information from APS about likely programming of a new school (neighborhood or choice), the specific impacts of 725 new seats at Jefferson on crowding elsewhere in south Arlington, or plans for the Patrick Henry/Career Center complex nearby.

We strongly recommend that the County and APS undertake open, transparent, community-based, coordinated long-range planning for parks, schools and other facilities, plus comprehensive or master planning for major sites such as Thomas Jefferson and the Henry/Career Center campus.

3) We generally agree that a new elementary school *could* be fitted into the western side of the Jefferson site, subject to important conditions and questions not yet resolved. The concept with broadest support includes a freestanding multi-story elementary school building in the northwest part of the site, with structured parking capped by green play areas, generally as shown in APS' modified scheme 2. There is also some tentative interest in a concept that would put the new school at the south end of the existing middle school building mostly on school-held property, as in APS' scheme 3, although that could obscure the community-center entrance and raises questions about locations of parking.

Two entry-level issues affecting any scheme are whether structured parking is financially feasible, and whether traffic problems – which we need to review further – can be mitigated well. These and other major conditions and concerns are outlined in (C) and (D) below.

4) We have not reached consensus on whether a new elementary school *should* be built at Jefferson now. Nobody in the group says, “Never”. A sizeable portion of the working group supports building in accord with APS' Capital Improvement Plan as the most expeditious and cost-effective way to gain 725 urgently needed elementary-school seats in south Arlington. The other part of the group does not want to make such a large, permanent commitment of public funds and county-held property so quickly and without more information, comprehensive planning, and broader evaluation of alternatives. School population projections may point to a different site. Some are also concerned that adding major structures now would constrict opportunities to realign the middle school and community center when that aging building needs to be replaced, or to gain more usable park space through coordinated planning of the whole site.

C) PARK AND COMMUNITY USES: Thomas Jefferson's diverse outdoor and indoor attractions -- the wooded areas, fields, courts, playground, measured trail, community center, gym and theater -- support an array of programs and activities enjoyed by many thousands of Arlingtonians and visitors every year. Our site tour, public comments, and background materials prepared by staff confirm the immense value of these resources in our densely populated, growing community.

After reviewing the site and school-siting concepts presented by APS, the TJWG has reached a consensus that the most prudent way to preserve the park and community center is to maintain the whole area east of the existing building essentially as is, and to place any new structures – a new elementary school and/or a middle-school addition – on the west side of the site or on the school-held property at the south end of the current middle school. This would keep the park's features in their current locations and maintain clear views and access from 2nd Street South through the trees into the park.

Nonetheless, school construction on the west side will have ripple effects to the east. Potential impacts and concerns include:

- 1) There have been references to possible use of park fields for stormwater management or geothermal wells. Any proposal affecting areas north or east of the existing middle school building should be disclosed early to allow for thorough, unpressured county and community review.
- 2) The organic garden is a valuable asset, well rooted in a location that provides essential sunlight, water, proximity to the middle school, and room to grow. If possible, it should not be moved.
- 3) School expansion should not reduce community use of park fields, courts and playgrounds. An elementary school will need its own playground and field. If APS proposes to use any existing park facilities for the elementary school, a joint-use agreement should be addressed before the project is approved. The existing joint-use agreement may also have to be revisited if the middle school expands.
- 4) Parking management during construction will be challenging. Access for community center and park uses must be maintained. Plans to deal with any loss of theater access and parking should be made well in advance in consultation with the organizations that rely on the theater. Impacts on the County Fair will also have to be addressed with substantial lead time.

There is an outstanding policy issue too. The county-held property west of the existing school is zoned as parkland, although much of it is now occupied by surface parking lots and driveways and walkways for the middle school and theater. The property's assessed value in county real estate records is around \$3.5 million². Some members of the working group question whether such valuable acreage should be made available for school construction without some form of compensation for the loss of potential public green or recreational space, especially when our growing population needs more outdoor room as well as more school seats. This is an issue for Arlington in general, not just for this site.

D) CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOOL EXPANSION: APS' presentations, while conceptual, suggest that a new elementary school can be accommodated on the west side or southern edge of the middle school, provided that it is a multi-story building with structured parking. This relatively compact design makes best use of scarce land. Providing green space and play areas on top of parking could also meet most of the elementary school's recreational needs without impinging on the public park.

As noted in our summary above, there are two major questions about the feasibility of this approach:

- 1) The cost of structured parking is not included in APS' adopted CIP. We ask both the County Board and School Board to confirm that structured parking should be an integral part of any school construction at Jefferson and that the needed funds will be made available.
- 2) Transportation issues remain to be tackled in detail. Locating all school entrances, parking and bus loops on the west side will separate school and park/community center traffic, but compound the school-related pressures on Old Glebe Road and nearby 2nd Street South. Safe walking and biking routes for current and future students need more attention as well. Neighborhood representatives have also raised concerns about the wider and cumulative impacts of school expansion at Jefferson plus the anticipated growth at the Henry/Career Center complex less than a mile away.

² The park land and improvements on both sides of the school-held property are valued at over \$25.5 million.

We have not yet had time for thorough review of the substantial analyses provided by APS' consultants or comments by County staff. Subject to Board guidance, we propose to continue working on this in order to assess the magnitude of likely problems and offer recommendations in our final report.

Beyond those points, the TJWG's charge states that the group, if recommending siting of a new school, should "develop general conditions and design principles to address both the site context and neighborhood context and to mitigate impacts on existing public areas and uses." This memo mentions a number of relevant points. A formal list could be helpful even if no school project at Jefferson materializes for a while. If the Board so chooses, we stand ready to work with staff on this, within time constraints.

E) PLANNING: As noted above, TJWG members, while differing on some points, agree on the desirability of broader, transparent long-range planning to inform siting decisions and investments in schools, parks and other needed public facilities. A long-term master plan for APS school construction, developed with ample public input and implemented gradually as funding allows, could reduce community uncertainties and help the county and civic associations plan related improvements such as sidewalks. An updated Public Spaces Master Plan will be very helpful as well.

For the Thomas Jefferson site, the County and APS should commit to coordinated, open planning as a foundation for future changes and investments in any part of the property – school structures, the gym, outdoor facilities, or parking areas. If a master plan for the site seems too ambitious, smaller steps should be taken initially. For instance, the County's current Capital Improvement Plan includes \$5.5 million in fiscal year 2017 for replacement of the park's tennis and basketball courts, playground and other outdoor amenities. This offers an opportunity for community conversations and creative approaches that could also enhance the garden, gathering areas used by students, and entrances to the gym.

In conclusion, we appreciate the opportunity to work together on this challenging assignment and look forward to the work session December 2nd.

ATTACHMENT

Thomas Jefferson Site Evaluation

COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND FEEDBACK

Substantial feedback from the community was solicited throughout the Thomas Jefferson Site Evaluation Process, and included:

- Community Open House (held on October 18, with over 130 attendees)
- Thomas Jefferson Middle School PTA survey (with 96 responses from teachers, parents, and students)
- Alcovia Heights survey (with over 40 responses)
- Feedback Form (available at the open house and online, with 215 responses)
- Online Comments via the project website (43 comments submitted to the WG as of November 25)
- Comments taken from the general public at all Working Group meetings

EVALUATION MATERIALS PROVIDED BY COUNTY STAFF

In order to assist the TJ Working Group in their evaluation process, County staff provided the group with a detailed set of background materials relevant to the site and its surroundings. All evaluation materials were posted to the project website at: <http://projects.arlingtonva.us/plans-studies/land-use/thomas-jefferson-site-evaluation/documents/>

POLICY DOCUMENTS

- Thomas Jefferson Site Evaluation Working Group Charge
- Excerpt from the Arlington Heights Civic Association Neighborhood Conservation Plan
- Thomas Jefferson Site Joint Use Agreement between County and APS
- Criteria for Consideration of Arlington County Facilities and Land in Arlington Public Schools' Capacity Planning Process

SITE CHARACTERISTICS

- Parcel ownership and boundaries
- Figure-ground diagram
- Building ages
- Building heights
- Adjacent building types and uses
- Topography and drainage
- Pedestrian entrances and loading of existing middle school and community center
- Quality of pedestrian experience around site
- Demographic information for ¼ mile radius around site (population, age groups, household size)
- 2014 assessed land value for TJ site
- Area elementary schools
- Area public transportation
- Area transit stops and ridership

- Parking lot capacity and utilization
- On-street parking capacity and utilization
- Area parking permit zones
- Pedestrian bridge counts (over Arlington Boulevard)
- Traffic counts
- Crash data
- Area parks and open space
- General information about community center
- Locations and sizes of recreational facilities on site
- Park and community center use rates
- TJ facility users
- TJ facility revenue
- Recent park investments
- Long range park and community center planning documents
- Natural resources inventory
- Comprehensive tree survey
- Arlington County Fair data
- Arlington County Fair map
- TJ community garden master plan
- Stormwater management requirements