



June 3, 2021

Sara Baldwin  
Acting Executive Director  
Fairfax County Park Authority

Dear Ms. Baldwin:

As the President of the McLean Citizens Association (MCA), a non-profit organization representing the interests of residents living in the McLean area since 1914, I am writing to express several concerns regarding the McLean Central Park Development Concept released to the public on Monday, May 24, 2021.

McLean Central Park is the McLean community's predominant local park and is highly valued for its natural and open green space, recreation facilities, and the adjacent library and community center. The citizens of McLean value this park immensely and many are passionate about its future. Awareness about the proposed changes to McLean Central Park is growing rapidly.

### **The Process and Procedure**

First and foremost, the single public presentation with little community notification and the very short comment period for what are significant proposed changes to this key community resource is in these circumstances procedurally problematic. While we recognize that this was advertised as only a partially completed plan and a listening session, the single presentation and the announced time frames for the staff process are inadequate for truly gathering, obtaining and effectively analyzing community input that you want to obtain.

This abbreviated process is particularly inadequate given the amount of time that has lapsed since the publication of the 2013 Master Plan, the significant changes in the local environment since then, and the lack of coordination and communication about the plan proposals with major stakeholders, including the MCA, the McLean Community Center, affected adjacent and nearby neighborhoods, and the broader McLean community. Most of these stakeholders had little to no advance notification about the Development Concept. Coordination and communication with stakeholders and affected citizens is essential to ensure that improvements made to McLean Central Park properly reflect the desires of the community.

## The Planned Development

While the citizens of McLean were afforded the opportunity to provide public comment on the 2013 McLean Central Park Master Plan, mere implementation of that Master Plan from 8 years ago with some suggested change is not the appropriate planning and execution approach. A more fundamental and strategic approach is warranted and in the best interests of the community. In this regard, we call to your attention that a great deal has changed locally over the past eight years, including:

- Significant development in nearby Tysons, resulting in increased traffic congestion within and through McLean and in the areas between McLean and Tysons, as well as increased use of McLean parks by residents of Tysons;
- The forthcoming amendments to the Comprehensive Plan with respect to the McLean Community Business Center (CBC), which, among other effects, would result in a much more urban downtown McLean, with significant increases in population density, building heights, and traffic congestion;
- Heightened awareness and concern for the ecological sensitivity of McLean's natural areas, and areas of McLean Central Park that are within the designated, protected, Resource Protection Area; and
- Amendments to and enhancements in the use of other local parks, including Clemyjontri Park and Langley Forks Park (upon completion of the land swap with the National Park Service).

Recognizing these changes since the completion of the 2013 McLean Central Park Master Plan, we have a number of specific concerns with various elements of the Development Concept announced in the May 24, 2021 public release.

- 1) **Concerns about replacing green space with built environment:** On a broad and fundamental level, we have serious concerns about replacing highly valued green space with more built environment in this central portion of McLean. McLean Central Park is highly valued for the access it provides to McLean's natural spaces, trees, forests, trails, and recreational facilities. It is also an ecologically sensitive area with significant protected areas adjacent to Dead Run which has just benefited from a costly stream restoration project. Much of the park lies in flood plain and stormwater runoff from impervious surfaces such as roofs, parking lots, and paved surface contribute to erosion in the park. The Development Concept proposes changes that would transform this central green area into a highly developed, built environment with significant loss of natural space and tree canopy. Especially given the significant changes to the community referenced above since the adoption of the 8-year-old Master Plan, we do not believe this major proposed transformation is in the community's best interest. While the Development Concept appears to try to satisfy many different active recreational use constituencies, McLean Central Park should not be developed to try to site in this central green space and satisfy so many active recreational uses with the attendant structures and equipment.
- 2) **Concerns about lack of community input on desired new park features:** Also, on a broad level, there are concerns about Development Concept introduction of new park

elements for which demand has not been documented, articulated or surveyed in the community, while neglecting demonstrated demand for existing facilities or facilities that are in need of maintenance, updating, or repair (discussed further below). New park elements that are proposed but lack demonstrated demand include the proposed amphitheater, bocce courts, and game tables. The proposed plan would reduce the number of the highly utilized tennis courts while increasing demand (by allowing use for pickle ball) without offering an acceptable alternative. Facilities that have been requested by members of the community, including updated playgrounds and skateboard facilities, have not been addressed. The Development Concept also does not address the removal of the disc golf course facility, an action that was taken without public notice or consultation.

### **3) Concerns related specifically to the proposed amphitheater:**

- a. No demonstrated need:** The Development Concept's major item with capital construction costs is an amphitheater with seating for several hundred attendees. While this may have been a community desire 8 years ago, there is simply no demonstrated need for the amphitheater. This is especially the case in light of the the Alden Theater at the McLean Community Center as well as the new, several stages nearing completion at the Capitol One Center, which are easily accessible to the greater McLean community and other County residents.

In addition, the existing gazebo, located near the proposed amphitheater, already provides space for outdoor events and fulfills the need for an outdoor gathering spot. The connection of the gazebo to the community is well established as reflected by its existing wall of donors. The precedent pictures in the Development Concept presentation slides reflect amphitheaters in highly urban locations, which is not suitable for McLean Central Park. The gazebo, like other parts of McLean Central Park referred to above, have not been properly maintained. The Development Concept should emphasize the importance of adequate maintenance of McLean Central Park's existing resources rather than capital construction of new facilities which have no demonstrated need or desire.

- b. Undesirable location: The Neighborhood:** The location of the proposed amphitheater is undesirable, as it is adjacent to numerous residential homes in a quiet neighborhood. The amphitheater would fundamentally alter the serene environment that currently exists there, and would create significant noise and illumination, including -- most troubling -- at night, due to evening events.
- c. Undesirable location: Traffic impacts, Noise and Audio Quality:** The proposed amphitheater location would greatly increase traffic congestion along Ingleside Avenue and Churchill Road, which are already subject to cut-through traffic, and other narrow neighborhood streets designed for low intensity traffic in the area. It would also be located adjacent to one of the two most intensively traveled, major roadways (Dolley Madison Boulevard), and one of the most significant and congested McLean intersections (Dolley Madison Boulevard and Old Dominion Drive). Proper planning for the proposed amphitheater needs to

include a study to determine likely traffic impact due to the use of the amphitheater by a qualified professional to measure the impact and possible traffic mitigation alternatives. The proposed amphitheater location near these major arteries would likely result in significant stage-to-audience audio issues. Proper planning for the proposed amphitheater needs to also include a noise study by a qualified professional to evaluate this issue and possible alternatives measures to assure performances would attain the expected level of voice quality and clarity.

- d. **Parking:** The Development Concept does not address the need for parking to accommodate amphitheater event demand and provides for no additional parking other than 13 accessible parking spaces at the drop-off. Existing parking at the library and community center cannot be relied on to satisfy parking demand for events. Parking is frequently already at capacity at those facilities. The intensification at that location will likely result in over-parking on the nearby residential streets. A parking study by a qualified professional is needed rather than just assuming the existing parking will be sufficient.
- e. **Undesirable turnaround:** The proposed turnaround at the end of Elm Street would create significant traffic congestion on what is currently a quiet, residential street. Elm Street extension and “drop-off-pick up” turnaround as portrayed in the Development Concept would also be unnecessarily expensive and degrading the immediate environment requiring utility relocation and extensive regrading and damage the Park because a large number of healthy, mature trees would have to be removed.
- f. **Unaddressed need for safe pedestrian access:** The need for safe pedestrian access is not addressed at all in the Development Concept nor was it addressed adequately in the recent McLean CBC Plan revision. This needs to be considered within the larger context of the McLean CBC Plan as referenced above, and serious consideration needs to be given to construction of an ADA-compliant pedestrian access bridge to allow safe crossing of Dolley Madison Boulevard even in the absence of the amphitheater. It is simply insufficient for County staff to have responded to requests for this in the recent presentation that this will not be addressed because this is not your purview or focus—in effect, go talk to VDOT. As Dranesville Planning Commissioner Ulfelder stated recently at the County Planning Commission meeting on the proposed amendments to the Comprehensive Plan amendments for the CBC, the County has engaged in a “highly departmentalized Comprehensive Plan approach” which has not resulted in a desired outcome. We agree with this assessment. The Development Concept should expressly advocate for ease of safe pedestrian access between the CBC and the McLean Central Park, Dolly Madison Library and the McLean Community Center campus, rather than just focus on using parking at the other portions of the campus. As the McLean CBC population and density grow as envisioned by the Comprehensive Plan amendments for the CBC, the Development Concept needs

to reflect the increasing importance of this key community connectivity in coming years to enhance the attractiveness and utilization of the McLean Central Park.

- 4) FCPA focus ability to maintain:** There are already concerns about the condition of existing park features and FCPA's ability to maintain existing and new features. Once new facilities are constructed they become permanent and require maintenance. As mentioned above, the Development Concept does not feature improvements to existing features and facilities, yet existing playgrounds are woefully outdated, hard surface trails are often flooded after any significant rain or snow, gravel trails are not maintained, and the landscaping around the gazebo could be improved. Vegetation along trails is not maintained and often crowds the walking pathways and invasive species along the trails and in the wooded areas are creating great harm to the existing tree canopy. Maintenance of facilities may be less exciting to consider than capital construction, but it's highly important for the County and its residents to assure our parks are properly maintained.

In summary, MCA respectfully requests an extension to the Development Concept comment period, conduct of an earnest and full communication and coordination process, conduct of focused traffic, parking and noise studies, and analysis and with emphasis on more effective integration with the CBC should all occur prior to the further development and finalization of plans regarding the McLean Central Park Master Plan or the Development Concept. We appreciate the efforts to date, but believe that greater listening and community involvement and greater analysis of these issues are essential to the success of this initiative for enhancements to this vital community resource.

Sincerely,



Rob Jackson, President

CC:

Supervisor John Foust, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors

Jane Edmondson, Chief of Staff to Supervisor Foust

Timothy Hackman, Dranesville District Representative to the Fairfax County Park Authority Board

Paul Shirey, Manager · Project Management Branch, Fairfax County Park Authority

Adam Wynn, Project Manager & Senior Planner, Planning & Development Branch, Fairfax County Park Authority

Judy Pederson, Senior Information Officer, Fairfax County Park Authority