

North Ridge Citizens Association Meeting Minutes
Monday, February 10, 2020
George Mason Elementary School

Call to Order: 7:30 by Kay Stimson, President. Approximately 100 people in attendance. The meeting opened with a report by Alexandria Police Department Liaison Sgt. Tommy Ground, who said there were 33 calls to the department in the past month involving North Ridge. Ten calls involved theft from unlocked cars; one involved a car that was broken into. There was one theft of an express package from a front porch. The monthly average of calls over the last year was thirty-four, a number that Sgt. Ground characterized as "fantastically low for a neighborhood this size." He added a tip: "Please lock your cars!"

Jane Seward and Lyn Gas announced the Association's Spring Tree Sale kickoff, noting that since the Fall 2018, 180 trees have been planted under the NRCA program. They circulated flyers and let members know that orders would be due on March 8th. They also noted that the City has a canopy tree program where residents can get a free tree if they do not have overhead wires and if they plant the tree within six feet of the sidewalk. Details are being posted to the NRCA website: www.northridgecitizens.org.

George Mason Elementary School PTA president Sarah Hoffman and GM PTAC Representative Alicia Rutherford gave a presentation titled "The Present and Future of George Mason School." (see NRCA website). The goal was to show why George Mason, which was built in 1939, needs to be completely rebuilt and modernized. A recent audit of GM school showed 37 deficiencies. Many of these, in the words of Ms. Rutherford, are "big stuff." They include lack of a fire sprinkler system; mold in the basement; water pipes past their useful life expectancy; a sewer pump that needs to be rehabbed; roof and floor tiles that no longer adhere to aged, worn surfaces; and outdoor structural damage such as broken gutters and walkways. The building also is not compliant with the American Disabilities Act (ADA) in many respects.

Ms. Rutherford said that an ACPS feasibility study was launched last summer, with the final version expected to be presented by May. One option for the new school is that it can be built on the site of the current school, with the current front facade being retained. This option would require the student body to move to a "swing space" while construction of the new school is underway. Another option is to build a new school on the back of the existing property and have the students continue to use the existing school during construction. The feasibility study is likely to address the swing space issue.

However, the other key question is whether getting funding for a swing space will be possible. Superintendent Hutchins's proposed Capital Improvement Program (CIP) budget proposal, which is to be submitted in November, will need to indicate whether ACPS is seeking money for a swing space. If the money is requested by the schools, the Council will likely vote on it in December. Ms. Rutherford noted that the timeline for building a new George Mason has slipped several times. Currently, the plan is to go through the special use process and bring on the design team in 2023-24 and aim for the new school to be ready for occupation in 2027.

Following their presentation, Ms. Hoffman and Ms. Rutherford were asked what PTAC's role is with respect to commenting on the proposals. They replied that the PTAC's role is to support the teachers and the School Board and it will not take a position on the options. However, PTAC will be providing information about the proposals (and meetings about the proposals), and they will be encouraging individuals to attend the meetings and express their views. Ms. Rutherford noted that the School Board would be holding a working meeting on co-location on Wednesday the 12th to discuss co-location concepts and that this meeting was not listed on the slide presentation. Erika Gulick, the Director of Capital Programs Planning & Design for the Alexandria City Schools (ACPS) said that once the concepts for

George Mason are brought forward, the school will consult with interested persons for approximately two years "before we bring in the designers." There is not yet a date scheduled for a public meeting on the feasibility study but it "will probably be in March."

In response to another question, Ms. Gulick noted that the City of Alexandria owns most of the George Mason property and the open land behind the school. The whole property is currently specified for use for educational purposes, she noted, but when there is a rebuild the City Council "can decide how to use the property." She noted that there is already some "co-location" of services and programs with the Department of Parks & Recreation, which manages/maintains use of the playing fields and tennis courts.

Another resident asked why Mayor Justin Wilson had asked the Attorney General about land titling and zoning issues. Ms. Gulick replied that she was unaware of any such request. Another member asked what community input would look like and how ACPS would process it. Ms. Gulick replied that there would likely be a series of community/town hall meetings over a two-year period and all input would be considered. George Mason Principal Brian Orenmaa, who was present, noted that George Mason is perhaps the most over capacity of all Alexandria schools given its size. He discussed the history of George Mason accommodating students from other parts of the City. He said the school is likely to continue to do that as student growth is occurring in parts of the City where the schools are already at capacity.

A member of the audience noted that there are no dates yet for any ACPS community meetings on the feasibility study, even though the study is expected to be issued in May. He expressed his concern that this suggests that the impact of public input could be limited. Ms. Stimson stated that the time to make views known to the School Board and Council is now.

Ms. Stimson then gave a short presentation about colocation at GM School, City land use policies and proposed changes in 2020. Ms. Stimson noted that the City is at "an all-time low" in terms of availability of space and land for school use. North Ridge, she said, also has very limited green space compared to other neighborhoods, with just two percent of the neighborhood as open space, compared to a City-wide average of seven percent.

Ms. Stimson said that she would like to set up an NRCA task force to keep the whole North Ridge community engaged and informed on planning efforts for George Mason Elementary. She said that NRCA had pro bono legal, public relations and environmental expertise help moving forward. Ms. Stimson presented a list of potential community impacts and needs that NRCA task force will focus on, based on some initial Board and community input. (See slide show posted on the NRCA website.)

Ms. Stimson noted that she had heard concern from residents of Clay and Hayes Streets about how they might be affected if a new school was built on the back of the property. She has also received questions about the possible co-location of non-school facilities on the site. She explained that co-location is simply the location of shared City programs and services – including recreation centers, nonprofit programs and community sports program offerings. She said that in December 2019, City Manager Mark Jinks issued a memorandum stating that the City and ACPS had an "expectation that all feasible opportunities for co-location and shared use of publicly owned sites and services will be explored." The memo identified several areas for the potential extension of co-location offerings, such as childcare, health clinics, library services and affordable housing. (A copy of the memo was available at the meeting.)

Ms. Stimson noted that on January 23, Mr. Jinks also issued a memo to Council and School Board members proposing a draft joint resolution on co-location and shared use of school sites. (A copy of this memo was available at the meeting.) Based on the January 23rd meeting discussions and confirmation by Mayor Wilson, Ms. Stimson said she believed that the City intends to present the resolution for discussion at the

upcoming March 4th joint meeting of the School Board and the Council. Ms. Stimson also noted a series of key upcoming City and School Board meeting dates. She recommended that persons with concerns about the George Mason rebuild/modernization effort communicate with City Council using the Call.Click.Connect. system. She also recommended writing letters to local papers and joining NRCA/PTA.

The audience then asked more questions. In response to a question about how ACPS had reached the projected enrollment numbers for George Mason, Ms. Gulick said that extra-capacity will be needed for City-wide student growth and that there will be busing. A member of the audience stated that it seems the upcoming Council/Board meeting could be very important and that policies or guidelines on co-location could be put into effect very quickly. Ms. Rutherford encouraged people to submit comments to the Council and Board before then.

There was then a brief discussion of the elements of Mr. Jink's proposed resolution and in particular the provision of the proposed resolution that states that "colocation of uses and services will be explored to the extent feasible by the core [City and School] staff team on each [redevelopment] site." Ms. Rutherford noted that some of the options that are likely to be included in the feasibility study can be found on the January 23 meeting agenda at "electronic School Board" under the "meetings" tab of the ACPS website.

School Board Chair Cindy Anderson noted that the School Board has had no discussions on the City Manager's proposed resolution on co-location. She said the March 4th joint ACPS-City meeting is a work session, and no votes are planned. She said that the Board will need to have a lot more information.

An audience member asked Ms. Anderson if the Board needed to know if there is money for a swing space by the time the City approves its CIP budget this year. Ms. Anderson replied "yes."

Another resident asked Ms. Gulick if there was going to be an environmental impact study (EIS) to determine whether a school could be built on the back part of the site. Ms. Gulick said that an EIS is a specific EPA requirement that does not need to be met at this point, stressing that it will be done at a later point. However, she noted that the site soil and wetland will be looked at as part of the feasibility study.

Another attendee said that she would appreciate it if the task force could provide some guidance to individuals who wished to comment to the Council or School Board. Ms. Stimson said she hoped that could be done. She also said that she would post the slide show on the NRCA website.

After concluding discussion on the renovation of George Mason Elementary, NRCA moved on to Board business and reports. Transportation Chair Bruce Snapp gave an update on the repair work being done on the West Glebe Road bridge near I-395. At the moment, vehicles over five tons and pedestrians are restricted from using the bridge. An informational meeting was to be held on February 12 in the Gunston Middle School cafeteria. The plan is to rebuild the support structure, the girders and the railings.

Ms. Stimson noted that the Seminary Road redesign would back on the Council docket on February 11. Ms. Stimson reported that Lindsay Automotive Group is planning to renovate several of their buildings and is planning to bring the architectural drawings to NRCA's April meeting. Ms. Stimson said that the Del Ray Small Area Plan presented to the Planning Commission on February 4th had several recommendations for increased density that raised questions for North Ridge and she would be reaching out to learn more.

Ms. Stimson announced that the next NRCA meeting is the association's Annual Meeting, to be held on March 9 at George Mason Elementary. She referred attendees to the slate of new officers and Board members which was circulated at the meeting. Ms. Stimson adjourned the meeting at 9:30 PM.

Russ Bailey, Scribe