


THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION
8787 Georgia Avenue • Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3760



Agenda Date: November 6, 2003 Item #6

October 31, 2003

Memorandum

To: Montgomery County Planning Board

Via: Jeff Zyontz, Chief 
Countywide Planning Division

From: Robert W. Gibbs, Jr., Natural Resources Manager 
John E. Hench, Ph.D., Park Planning and Resources Analysis Supervisor 

Subject: Blockhouse Point Conservation Park

Recommendation: Publish the Proposed Public Hearing Draft Master Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park as the Public Hearing Draft and set December 18, 2003 as the date for the Planning Board's Public Hearing.

Background: Blockhouse Point Conservation Park is located at 14750 River Road, Darnestown, MD and encompasses approximately 630 acres. Acquisition was initiated in 1967; the most recent purchase occurred in 1980. The park lies between the C&O Canal to the south and Esworthy Road to the north and is bisected by MD Route 190, River Road. Muddy Branch stream valley defines the park's eastern boundary. Callithea Farm, a 97 acre equestrian facility, lies adjacent to the park on its southwestern side. M-NCPPC's Pennyfield Lock Neighborhood Conservation Area, a 1.9 acre community-use park, lies just east of the C&O Canal National Historic Park on Blockhouse Point's southeastern corner. Pursuant to recommendations in the Master Plan for the Potomac Sub-region (M-NCPPC, 2001), Callithea Farm is being acquired as public parkland.

Blockhouse Point contains a variety of exceptional resources. Natural features include mature upland forest, floodplain forest, palustrine wetlands, streams, river-rock outcrops, at least 9 species of threatened, endangered, or watch-list plants, a wide diversity of wildlife species, and spectacular views of the Potomac River and the C&O Canal. Blockhouse Point contains the highest number of known archaeological sites of any park in the County. To date, 35 sites have been discovered in the park, 33 prehistoric and two historic. The Wheeler/Didenhover Mill at the Mouth of Muddy Branch, first offered for sale in 1782 and operated until the early nineteenth century, is the earliest historical site in the park. The other site of historic significance is the Civil War era "Camp at Muddy Branch." In 1862, the 19th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry built three blockhouses to guard Violette's Lock and Pennyfield Lock on the C&O Canal. The

earthen rampart remains of one of the blockhouses are located in the park. In fact, the original Greek cross design of the blockhouse is still discernable to the careful observer. The "Camp at Muddy Branch" is the only relatively undisturbed example of a Civil War campsite remaining in the Washington Metropolitan area.

Based on the exceptionally high quality of its natural and cultural resources, its intrinsic natural beauty -- especially the breath-taking views of the Potomac River -- and its size, staff consider Blockhouse Point Conservation Park one of the top five conservation parks in the County park system.

Previous Planning Efforts:

The Trail Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park (M-NCPPC, 1989) established an official, natural surface trail system for the park. The plan provided a trail connection to Callithea Farm and designated trails as hiking only or joint-use hiking/equestrian.

The Park Recreation and Open Space Master Plan (PROS) (M-NCPPC, 1998) describes conservation parks as: "Generally large areas that preserve specific natural, archaeological, or historical features; are typically located in upland areas; and are acquired specifically for environmental preservation purposes. Conservation parks may include outstanding examples of natural communities, self-sustaining populations of rare, threatened, or endangered plant and animal species, or unique archaeological and historical resources. Given the sensitive nature of the resources in conservation parks, development is very limited and generally restricted to passive recreation areas and opportunities such as trails, fishing and picnic areas, and nature study."

The Countywide Park Trails Plan (M-NCPPC, 1998) originally proposed both a natural surface and hard surface trail paralleling Muddy Branch from the city of Gaithersburg to the C&O Canal through Blockhouse Point Conservation Park. However, the plan noted that conflicting public policy existed as to the types of trails that should occur in the Muddy Branch stream valley (including the portion in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park) and proposed that final decisions on trail surfaces await an update of the Potomac Master Plan.

The Potomac Subregion Master Plan (M-NCPPC, 2002) noted that locations of park trails are generally decided in the context of park and trail master plans rather than community master plans. For this reason, a separate Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Trail Plan was recommended for the Muddy Branch stream valley corridor between the city of Gaithersburg and the C&O Canal.

The Planning Board adopted the Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Trail Plan in January, 2002. This plan amended the Countywide Park Trails Plan (M-NCPPC, 1998) to: 1) remove the hard surface trail proposal from Blockhouse Point Conservation Park and Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Units 1 & 2 and retained the hard surface trail proposal for Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Unit 3 (e.g., between Quince Orchard

Road and MD Route 28); and 2) recommend that a final decision as to whether or not to construct the hard surface trail wait completion of a facility plan.

The Park Master Plan Team:

The Proposed Public Hearing Draft Master Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park was developed by a staff team consisting of: Carole Bergmann (Natural Resources Management), Jamie Christianson (Montgomery County Parks, Northern Region), Lyn Coleman (Park Planning and Resource Analysis), Norma Kawecki (Park Planning and Resource Analysis), Barbara Lerch (Park Planning and Resource Analysis), Naomi Manders (Park Planning and Resource Analysis), Callum Murray (Community-based Planning), Doug Redmond (Park Planning and Resource Analysis), Tanya Schmieler (Park Planning and Resource Analysis), Dean Smith (Montgomery County Park Police), and James D. Sorensen, Ph.D., (Historic Preservation). Robert W. Gibbs, Jr., (Natural Resources Management) and John E. Hench, Ph.D., (Park Planning and Resource Analysis) are managers for the project. Jamie Christianson is the Manager of Blockhouse Point Conservation Park.

The Planning Process:

Schedule	Activity
July-November 2001	Prepare maps. Collect, analyze, and interpret data. Form conclusions. Develop preliminary staff recommendations.
October 2001	Hold public Meeting to kick-off planning process and accept public comments
November 2001-April 2003	Conduct separate site visits/meetings with the public and special interest groups. Refine recommendations. Develop Staff Draft Park Master Plan.
August 2003	Publish Staff Draft Park Master Plan
September 2003	Hold public meeting to accept comments on Staff Draft. Refine recommendations.
October 2003	Brief Northern Area Recreational Advisory Board. Publish Proposed Public Hearing Draft
November 2003	Brief Planning Board. Publish Public Hearing Draft. Set date for Public Hearing.
December 2003	Hold Planning Board's Public Hearing
Early Winter 2004	Summarize testimony from Public Hearing and develop staff's response. Schedule Planning Board's work sessions.
Late Winter 2004	Planning Board's approval of Park Master Plan
Spring 2004	Brief County Council's PHED Committee.
Summer 2004	Publish completed Park Master Plan.

Overview of Major Plan Concepts:

The Proposed Public Hearing Draft Master Plan for Blockhouse Point Conservation Park identifies natural and cultural resources in the park needing special care, protection, and management and provides recommendations to ensure that these resources are preserved for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. The biggest threats to these resources are: 1) impacts from non-native species including invasive plants and gypsy moth; 2) over population of white-tailed deer; 3) vandalism and theft of valuable archaeological and historical resources; and 4) unauthorized trail construction and/or use.

The Plan recommends that park improvements (e.g., trails, parking areas, kiosks) should avoid and/or minimize impacts to areas of sensitive natural or cultural resources. A program for the regular and routine monitoring and maintenance of trails should be established. Recognized trail impacts should be mitigated. Unnecessary fragmentation of high quality forest should be avoided. Use of the park should not significantly impact natural and cultural features. The location of two sites overlooking the Potomac River and C&O Canal should be formalized and access limited to people on foot. Further, the two sites should be monitored and maintained on a regular basis to minimize impacts to steep slopes, highly erodible soils, native plants, rock outcrops, and cultural resources. A comprehensive natural resource management plan should be developed for the park and on-going inventory and monitoring of the park's natural and cultural resources should continue. Concentrations of non-native invasive plants should be identified and management actions be taken in accordance with the Management Plan for Non-Native Invasive Plants in Montgomery County Parks (M-NCPPC, 2003). Cooperative efforts with State and Local Governments to manage gypsy moth should continue. On-going management of white-tailed deer should continue consistent with the Comprehensive Management Plan for White-tailed Deer in Montgomery County (M-NCPPC, 2002). Archaeological surveys to further document the park's rich cultural history should continue. These efforts should draw heavily on volunteers thereby establishing a growing constituency that could effectively advocate for the protection and interpretation of the park's cultural resources. And finally, a cultural learning center should be established at Callithea Farm to interpret and possibly reconstruct, through living history exhibits, the Civil War encampments and fortifications existing at Blockhouse Point.

The Proposed Public Hearing Draft recommends public access to the park via a system of natural surface trails connecting with Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park to the north, the C&O Canal and Pennyfield Lock Neighborhood Conservation Area to the south, and Callithea Farm to the west. The majority of the trails are proposed as "hiking only." However, a few are designated for "hikers and equestrians" or "all users, i.e., hikers, equestrians, and people on bikes."

The Proposed Public Hearing Draft recommends development of signage and thematic programs focusing on natural history, archaeology, and American history, especially the Civil War. Interpretive signs and programs will foster an appreciation for Blockhouse

Point's exceptional natural and cultural resources and promote sound stewardship by growing an informed park constituency.

The Proposed Public Hearing Draft recommends future park acquisition of properties located at 14700 River Road and 1340 Esworthy Road. The former property includes high quality forest and is bordered by parkland to the west, south, and east and by River Road to the north. The latter property would provide important access to Blockhouse Point Conservation Park at its northern boundary and provides a sustainable trail connection to Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park.

Response to Public Comments

The Proposed Public Hearing Draft responds to a number of comments made either at the Public Meeting on September 17, 2003 or subsequently through e-mail or telephone conversations.

First, the Proposed Public Hearing Draft recommends a direct trail connection from the main park entrance on the south side of River Road to the Muddy Branch Trail on the north side of River Road. Upon leaving the parking lot, this natural surface connection crosses River Road and then follows the alignment of old River Road in an easterly direction to where it intersects with the Muddy Branch Trail. Like the Muddy Branch Trail, the connection is proposed to be open to people on foot, horse-back, or bike (See the Proposed Public Hearing Draft; page 4, Figure 2).

Second, the Proposed Public Hearing Draft recommends a modified alignment for the Muddy Branch Trail north of River Road. The modified alignment reduces fragmentation of high quality upland forest by relying instead on a route that traverses floodplain forest already impacted by non-native invasive plant species as well as upland areas – including the existing pipeline right-of-way. As an added bonus, staff believes that the modified alignment has significantly more aesthetic appeal than the original proposal.

And third, the Proposed Public Hearing Draft does *not* include the following language from the earlier Staff Draft regarding the proposed Cultural Learning Center at Callithea Farm: “A separate plan for Callithea Farm should be prepared at some future date to identify opportunities for commemorating the role of Montgomery County in the Civil War. Facilities could include: an interpretive center of approximately 19,000 square feet in size that would include a large auditorium, classrooms; a 27,000 square foot parking lot; and a one-acre stormwater management facility. The complex would encompass approximately 2.75 to 3 acres.” Instead, the following language was included on page 24 of the Proposed Public Hearing Draft: “A separate plan for Callithea Farm should be prepared at some future date. The plan should focus on maintaining the property as a publicly owned horse farm (Potomac Subregion Master Plan, M-NCPPC, 2002; page 21) and consider the possibility of developing an interpretive center that would focus on the role of Montgomery County in the Civil War. Planning for this future facility should be

guided by the following principles: 1) the viewshed of the farm should be protected; 2) the proposed facility should compliment the existing equestrian operation and vice versa; 3) the size (i.e., square footage) of the proposed visitor center should be consistent with existing buildings on the site; and 4) the proposed facility should reinforce the rural character of the area.”

Attachment

Cc: Park Master Plan Team

JEH/bhpcp proposed public hearing draft memo