

Clubhouse #11 Closed, Sold

Community Struggling for Information, Summer Recreation

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

“Whenever young people have something they can grab onto – something to help them keep a positive attitude – seems like someone grabs it away,” says Ward 8 resident Yvette Rogers. The Boys and Girls Clubs’ Clubhouse #11 kept her son, Kevin Jackson, “off the street, from running into the wrong things,” for 12 years, Rogers says. In addition to sports, it provided opportunities for him to tutor and chaperone younger kids, inspiring him to enter the counseling field himself.

On June 15, Clubhouse #11, 620 Milwaukee Pl., SE, was closed indefinitely by the Boys and Girls Clubs (BGC) of Greater Washington.

“It was a big part of his life, and of mine,” Rogers explains, noting her long work hours. Even though Jackson has followed Coach Eric to the BGC facility at THEARC, he is feeling the loss of the neighborhood club.

Samantha Williams and her teenage son, Jamal, who participated regularly in the clubhouse for four years, have similarly been disappointed by the closure – and by the lack of straightforward information about the facility’s sale.

In April, BGC announced its intention to sell several buildings, citing financial difficulties; a then-unnamed buyer would keep Clubhouse #11 open for community use, they said, but details were minimal. Mayor Adrian Fenty told community members that the facility – which reported more than 600 members, with 120 daily participants -- would not close.

“We’ll make sure the one on Milwaukee Avenue won’t close this summer,” Fenty announced at the Anacostia Coordinating Council annual meeting on May 27. “It’s a busy place. There’s got to be a solution.”

The mayor’s office did not respond to requests for comment after the clubhouse closed.

Purchase Finalized, Plans Still Unknown

The DC Council and BGC reached an agreement in early June for the District to purchase three other BGC facilities – in Wards 1, 2, and 6 – and preserve programming at another Ward 6 facility. But Clubhouse #11 was already under contract for purchase.

“We can’t stop the Boys and Girls Clubs from selling,” says Ward 8 Councilmember Marion Barry. “But I can use the relationship I have with Friendship Charter Schools and with [Chairman] Donald Hense to get the community involved... to be sure they have input and reap the benefits.”

Friendship, which operates the nearby Southeast Elementary Academy (645 Milwaukee Pl.) was widely identified early on as the clubhouse purchaser. In late June, BGC confirmed the sale to Friendship. At press time, however, the charter school organization

was still making no statement about the purchase – or about plans to make clubhouse facilities available to the community.

Barry says he is confident that Friendship intends to create a community center once the property is in their hands. He plans to create a Community Advisory Committee to work with Hense.

After the Sale

“We’ll meet with Donald Hense and have already met with Mr. Barry,” says William Lockridge. Ward 8 activist (and State Board of Education representative). “But that is not where we are.”

Lockridge is among those who believe Clubhouse #11 represents a community asset that should not have been sold without community involvement. The community, he says, has a great deal invested in the property – through thousands of volunteer hours and financial and in-kind contributions -- and should have been offered the “right of first refusal.”

Tamika Hampton, clubhouse volunteer and founder of the non-profit Bridging the Gap, argues that BGC used Clubhouse #11 participants – including individual names -- to solicit region-wide funding and then pulled out of an area the grant was meant to support, without first notifying that community.

“When they did tell the community, it was really late. Nothing could be done,” says Andrew Gaston, president of Bridging the Gap. Gaston participated in Clubhouse #11 programs as a youth and coached there as an adult. He is helping to plan a rally “to let community know that the club is sold and figure out what are we going to do for kids in the immediate area.”

NiCole Jones, vice president of Bridging the Gap and former teen center director at Clubhouse #11, fears for teens who have lost an anchor in their lives. “That Clubhouse was not the answer for everything, but that little bit meant a lot.”

BGC is offering full summer camp for all ages at their facility at THEARC, 1901 Mississippi Ave., SE. Staff from Clubhouse #11 moved there to help ease the transition. Some youth are taking advantage of this, although families continue to express concerns about neighborhood beefs, local drug traffic and other issues. Teen programming at Anacostia high school will not begin until the fall, BGC now says, as will programming for younger participants, which Friendship is to offer under the sale agreement.

So far, however, Friendship has not shared plans – or solicited input – from the community. While adults want to see follow-through, Jones says, youth particularly need to hear from their leaders...and see results. “When they say they’re going to do something, they need to do it.”

For rally details, contact William Lockridge, 202-431-5368. Regarding the Advisory Committee, contact Councilmember Marion Barry’s office, 202-698-2185. ★

Changing Views at Fort Mahan

Ideas, Volunteers Sought for Fall Community Improvement Day

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

Sight lines from Fort Mahan's hilltop have been a concern for nearly 150 years: In 1861, the problem was that Union forces couldn't see down from the hilltop to protect the area below; in 2009, the challenge is that people below can't see up to the hilltop to enjoy and monitor the park. This long-standing issue is one of many that will be addressed in this year's Community Improvement Day (CID), Sep. 12, organized by the DC Building Industry Association (DCBIA).

Fort Mahan was constructed on a hilltop northeast of what is now the Minnesota-Benning intersection. It was intended to protect nearby Benning's Bridge from Confederate encroachment. When it was completed, however, Union forces discovered a

big problem: The area below the hilltop was not visible from the fort's parapet. Therefore, National Park Service (NPS) history notes, 400 yards of rifle pits were constructed around the fort's perimeter.

Evidence of pits and other fort structures, including barracks, mess, stable and guard house have all but disappeared. Today, the 40-acre Fort Mahan Park includes a "hiker/biker trail," a multi-purpose field and a long-abandoned swimming pool. Now cared for by NPS and the District's Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), the park is nearly invisible to passers-by along most of its edges, making the area all-too-inviting for illicit activities, according to neighbors, and less welcoming for many in the community.

Groundwork Anacostia River DC

Groundwork Anacostia River DC is among the newest in a national network of "trusts," designed to "bring about the sustained regeneration" of physical environments through community-based partnerships. Local trusts are meant "to empower people, businesses and organizations to promote environmental, economic and social well-being" in their neighborhoods. National partners include the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program.

The local Groundwork trust focuses on areas in Wards 5-8, along the Anacostia River. Dennis Chestnut, lifelong Ward 7 resident and environmental activist, serves as executive director.

In addition to their work this summer on the Fort Circle parks and trail system, youth under Groundwork's direction will also be inventorying vacant properties.

The EPA will conduct assessments, and Groundwork will seek community input on re-use. Focus will be on options – community gardens or temporary tree nurseries, e.g. -- that would not require change of ownership. Such uses could help owners who otherwise face regular "Clean It or Lien It" fines while making a detriment to the community into an asset, Chestnut explains.

Groundwork is slated to receive funding through the District's Neighborhood Investment Fund this fall and plans collaboration with Deanwood Heights Main Street, Minnesota Avenue Great Streets, and the Parkside development. Groundwork will be working with Urban Land Institute on a technical assistance panel, scheduled for July 29-30.



Fort Mahan Park. Changing Views at Fort Mahan: Ideas, Volunteers Sought for Fall Community Improvement Day

Current Conditions, Future Hopes

"The park is an incredible space, but it has been underutilized in recent years," says Barry Lofton, communications director for Friendship Public Charter School/Collegiate Academy, adjacent to the park. Long-time neighbors fondly recall concerts and other community activities in the park, he says, while the current underutilization "draws negative elements."

A committee of DCBIA volunteers has been working with NPS, DPR, and community members to plan a "Community Improvement Day" (CID). Suggestions for making the park more accessible and inviting include fact/trivia trail markers, an open field for sports, picnic canopies and additional lighting. Most importantly to many in the neighborhood, plans call for demolishing the old pool house and filling the pool for a basketball court.

Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander says DCBIA has "been a great partner for Ward 7," through previous projects, and she believes the CID will be a "first step in making the park more attractive" and "creating enthusiasm" for its regular use.

Willette Seaward, chair of ANC 7D, hopes the CID will improve the park physically and help the community develop "pride of ownership" in it.

Seaward and Lofton both have a concern, however, about on-going maintenance. Both say they have reported abandoned and burned-out cars on DPR's property, for example, "and it takes the District months to remove them." Routine clean up, Lofton adds, is too often left to the school.

DPR, says spokesman John Stokes, believes “customer service is extremely important” and has recently instituted a “critical response team to assist with constituent concerns.” The agency is “excited to once again partner with DCBIA on a community based improvement project....As in previous years, DPR staff, DCBIA, partner organizations and community volunteers will come together” on the annual work day.

DCBIA's 17th Volunteer Project Needs Many

DCBIA is a local, non-profit trade association. It provides networking and educational programs for developers, contractors, architects and others; it also reports member perspectives on building-related policies. For the annual CID, volunteers from the building trades work together with community members to design, plan and implement the project. This year's CID at Fort Mahan Park is DCBIA's 17th such project.

“A lot of members are committed to this annual work and contribute as designers. Others donate financially,” says Danielle Melus, director of DCBIA's community service programs.

Lauren Frank, an interior designer with the Perkins and Will architecture/design firm, says CID projects take advantage of “building as a collaborative trade,” allowing volunteers to “learn from others in the trade and to work on things [they] don't necessarily do on a daily basis.”

To make plans a reality, however, DCBIA needs 300 volunteers to participate in the Sept. 12 work day.

In the meantime, two crews of young people – a high school group and an Americorps group, both coordinated by Groundwork Anacostia River DC – will be working on Fort Mahan Park, as well as nearby Fort Chaplin Park, over the summer. Another crew is at work on Fort Dupont Park. Together, their efforts will revitalize the three parks which comprise the 7.9-mile Fort Circle National Recreation Trail.

Groundwork's director, Dennis Chestnut, will also be conducting outreach in the local community for the CID project.

Many hands – at all skill-levels -- are needed on Sept. 12. Community service hours will be available for high school students. Contact Danielle Melus -- dcmelus@dcbia.org or 202-966-8665 – for details and to sign up. For more information about Groundwork Anacostia DC and its efforts in and around Ward 7's parks, contact Dennis Chestnut, 202-345-5693 or dchestn@msn.com. ★

ANCs Request DCPL Halt Community Questions Washington Highlands Library Proposal

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

The DC Public Library plans to replace the current Washington Highlands Library, located at 115 Atlantic St., SW, with a new structure. The proposed library was designed by world renowned architect David Adjaye, and his concept design was approved by the US Commission on Fine Arts in May. Two Ward 8 advisory neighborhood commission recently requested a halt to the project, however.

ANC 8D, in which the library is situated, and neighboring ANC 8E have asked DCPL to provide the community with a ward-wide library

services analysis, supply rationale for new construction rather than renovation and explain how DCPL is complying with requirement to give ANC perspectives “great weight.”

Ward 8 Councilmember Marion Barry reports that his office has fielded a number of concerns regarding DCPL's engagement process and about the design itself, adding that the construction contract has not yet been approved by the DC Council.

A meeting between DCPL, Adjaye and the community was planned for June 30. Further details will be available in August. ★

Anacostia and Woodson High School Plans Draw Applause and Questions

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

At a June 23 press conference, Mayor Adrian Fenty unveiled the final design concept for a new H.D. Woodson SHS. Later the same day, the Office of Public Education Facilities Management (OPEFM) hosted a “community update meeting” at Anacostia SHS, promising the “latest on the new school's design, schedule and academic program.” Woodson SHS

The recently unveiled facility for Woodson – a series of buildings housing an auditorium, a swimming/athletic wing and an academic wing -- will be located at 5500 Eads, NE, on the site of the former “Tower of Power,” demolished last year.

“When we demolished the old school,” said Allen Lew, director of the (OPEFM), “it was our goal to build a centerpiece for the community with the new facility.”

How the “centerpiece” will be integrated into the community remains unclear, however. At press time, OPEFM had just announced an update meeting for June 29. Community leaders were objecting to the short notice, the meeting's early-evening starting time and location (both chosen in opposi-

tion to previous community requests) and lack of decision-makers on the agenda. Sylvia Brown, who serves on ANC 7C, in which the school is situated, added that OPEFM had not yet met with her ANC or otherwise engaged the school's immediate neighbors. Meanwhile, community questions about facilities and program – as well as the integration of the two -- persist.

In announcing the new plans, the mayor's office specifically referenced OPEFM's five month suspension of communication with the community earlier this year, calling it “a brief respite to finalize the design concept.” OPEFM promises on-going meetings with the community, but no schedule was available at press time.

Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander applauded the unveiling, saying the new Woodson was “no longer a vision” but “a reality that will be completed in the very near future.” Construction is expected to be completed in July 2011. She also assured the public that the new facility will not house a charter or selective-admission school but a comprehensive high school.

OPEFM Director Allen Lew, Ward 7 Councilmember Yvette Alexander and Mayor Adrian Fenty unveil new concept for H.D. Woodson SHS.



Anacostia SHS

DC public schools let out for the summer on June 15. Flyers for the recent update meeting on Anacostia High School bear a creation date of June 16, and the meeting was not yet posted on the agency's website as of June 18. Meeting participants report approximately 10 community members in attendance. Friendship Charter School – chosen by DCPS as “restructuring partner” for Anacostia and co-presenter at the June 23 meeting – did not respond to several requests for details to share with the community. OPEFM reports the following:

“This was the first of several meetings... Project architects from SORG Architect's Inc. went through a detailed analysis of the school and provided proposals for how the school will be restored to its original grandeur through an adaptive re-use/historic resto-

ration.” Plans include transforming the 1974 addition, as well as installing new HVAC, electrical and plumbing systems, windows, elevators and other systems. “An exciting new and expanded media center with vaulted ceilings and increased day-lighting is also envisioned.” William Lockridge, Ward 8 State Board of Education Representative, says constituents are concerned that recent construction details do not match those provided during earlier community meetings. In addition, he says, details have not been forthcoming regarding the agreement between DCPS and Friendship or plans for the upcoming school year. Many staff members were “excessed” at the end of the year, and new staff – including principals – were not yet in place at press time.

Ward 8 Councilmember Marion Barry also reports constituent concerns about Anacostia, noting

that he has “had a hard time getting information from the chancellor” about the partnership and that OPEFM “did not do a good job” of outreach for the recent meeting. He adds that Ballou SHS has received no restructuring partner at all and “is in worse shape” than Anacostia.

Barry, Lockridge and others are asking for better community engagement from DCPS, Friendship and OPEFM.

“I suggest that they get a complete plan and send it out to the community. Then have a series of meetings,” Barry says, adding, “We've gotten empty promises, and this is hurting people.”

For more information about modernizations, contact OPEFM at 202-698-7703. Details about program must be obtained from DCPS, 202-442-5885. ★