

Branch Closing, Playground Planned: Hopkins Organizes After Boys & Girls Club Announcement

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ



Area youth simply cannot do without an activity center at the Hopkins Apartments, say residents, neighbors and community leaders. Therefore, before the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Washington (BGC) pulls out of the Hopkins Branch in June, community members are organizing to see that programming continues.

“We’ll find a way to keep it going,” says Charletta Green, vice president of the Hopkins Apartments Residents Council. “We’re going through enough here. This club can’t close.”

Green is joined in her determination by others on the residents council, including President Kalimah Abdul-Sabur; Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells and his staff; Capitol Hill Group Ministry (CHGM) and others in the community.

Boys and Girls Clubs Restructuring

In an April 8 statement, BGC announced its intention to “restructure” its offerings, closing several sites across the region. Hopkins Branch – which has been operating with two BGC staff members in space donated by the DC Housing Authority (DCHA) – is among those closing.

“We want to be in public housing,” says M.J. Morrow, BGC’s chief operating officer. “But the program also has to be cost effective. We have to operate at sites where we can provide a full range of programming having a measurable impact.”

The relatively small program at Hopkins Branch “doesn’t make a lot of sense,” Morrow argues, citing fewer than 25 participants each day – 20 shy of BGC’s “cost-effective” minimum. Sources familiar with the Hopkins Branch say that more children participate throughout the week, but not every child

participates every day. Morrow explains, however, that BGC’s restructuring focus is on sites where their entire program – health, fitness, arts, life skills and career education – can be offered as a whole. There are “physical constraints” at the Hopkins location, she adds.

Meanwhile, the much larger Eastern Branch – 46,000 square feet, about a mile away at 17th & C streets SE – has been shuttered and on the market for two years. Several proposals to allow the nonprofit Neighbors United to operate a community center from that facility have not (yet) succeeded. The facility – advertised as “available for immediate occupancy” in BGC’s April 9 statement – is not usable, Morrow said on April 21. “I would not feel comfortable putting children in there ... it’s been empty for two years and needs capital investment.”

BGC cannot afford that investment, Morrow says. In lieu of programming anywhere in Ward 6, the group is working on “transition plans” for current participants and proposes busing Hopkins youth to sites in Ward 7 or 8. But many do not see busing as a viable, long-term solution for area youth.

“The [Hopkins] closing creates a huge hole in our network of programs for young people and puts us in a desperate situation just before the summer vacation,” says Wells.

Continuing Programs in Southeast/Southwest

“I will be working with the council to find funds for programming for Potomac Gardens and Hopkins residents, and for youth in Southwest,” Wells declares. “I’ll also be working with community volunteers. We have to be sure there is some programming for this summer and after school next year.”

Beyond space and utilities, which are paid by DCHA, Green believes the

community has much of what it needs to continue programming. "The kids have all been in [the club] since they were 5 years old, learning what to do. They know how it's run ... and the high school kids need those community service hours," she argues, adding that parents do a great deal – from planning programs to bringing snacks. All that remains, she says, is to "raise the money for Tyrone's salary."

Many in the community hope that branch director Tyrone Mahoney can remain in a similar capacity when BGC leaves. (As a current BGC employee, Mahoney could not comment himself.) It is also hoped that BGC will agree to leave existing equipment at the DCHA location and that a grant from the Washington Nationals Dream Foundation will support local youth after BGC leaves. The residents council and CHGM's Housing Advocacy Committee are also seeking additional ways to support the continuation of youth programming.

Making Kids Smile, May 30

Prior to BGC's recent announcement, CHGM had been working – in conjunction with the Hopkins Branch, the residents council and other organizations – toward a new playground for Hopkins, to be constructed on May 30. Despite BGC's restructuring, plans proceed on the playground. Substantial funding is supplied by Make Kids Smile Foundation, but additional donations are required. Moreover, 250 volunteers are needed to assemble the equipment and paint a mural at the recreation site.

To volunteer for continuing youth activities: Charletta Green, Hopkins Apartment Residents Council, charlettagreen@yahoo.com or 202-547-0658; or Naomi Mitchell, Wells' office, nmitchell@dccouncil.us or 202-724-8014. To volunteer for – or donate toward – the new Hopkins playground: Sig Cohen, CHGM Housing Advisory Committee, SMCEagle@aol.com or 202-544-2448. ★



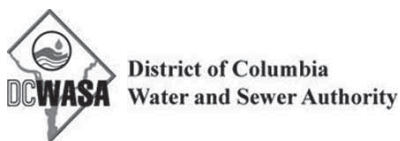
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