



Statement of James Wallar
President of the Friends of Colvin Run Mill
April 13, 2022

Chairman McKay and Supervisors:

Thank you for the opportunity to present today.

My name is James Wallar. I am the President of the Friends of Colvin Run Mill; we are members of the Alliance of Park Friends.

I have three messages I would like you to take away from my presentation:

Thank you for the new water wheel and flume!
Give parks higher priority in the budget!
Avoid a costly tunnel to nowhere!

Waterwheel and Flume

A new waterwheel and flume were installed last year. Ben Hassett, one of the last millwrights in America, hand crafted the white oak parts and assembled them at the mill. The 20 foot high wheel and 39 foot long flume look like the originals and maintain the historical integrity of the mill. Thank you BOS, FCPA, and the people of Fairfax County for voting on the bond to make this possible.



Park Funding

At his March 15 budget town hall, Supervisor Walkinshaw hit the nail on the head . He explained that to win the “new competition” by attracting firms with remote workers and thereby helping to drive the county’s economic growth, more investment is needed in our schools and “premier” parks.

In addition to promoting a thriving economy, parks also contribute to achieving other important community outcomes of the Fairfax County Wide Strategic Plan, including:

- providing cultural and recreational opportunities consistent with the One Fairfax policy;
- protecting the environment and contributing to the county's Climate Adaption and Action Plan, which is under development, and Tree Action Plan (the BOS has shown real leadership on environmental issues);
- promoting mental and physical health with places to exercise and plenty of green space;
- making neighborhoods livable with relief from urban heat islands.

79 percent of county households visit the parks. The parks are the face of the county government. They demonstrate that the government is efficient and effective, another objective of your Strategic Plan.

And yet, despite these important contributions, you have reduced the priority of parks. The FCPA's General Fund budget accounts for a remarkably small 0.6 percent of the county's total budget - half of what it was thirty years ago!

Some will say: "But wait: we lavish money on the parks, such as upgrading rec centers and installing a new water wheel! Yes indeed. But these are from the capital budget, often financed through bonds.

I am talking about the low priority you give to the general budget, the operations and maintenance budget, which takes care of those day-to-day activities that makes the most of these capital investments. You would not think of building a new school without a budget to ensure there were teachers and janitorial engineers. The same should be true for parks.

Others will say: "But wait: our county's 420 parks are popular and receive national recognition for excellence. What could be wrong?"

I don't claim to know details of the FCPA budget, but Jai Cole has pointed to some disturbing signs:

- Moving funds from personnel to operate facilities;
- Hiring and retention difficulties; and
- Relying heavily on fee generation.

What are the consequences?

Positions are held open to meet budget. At Colvin Run the full time site manager position was open for nearly two years while the temporary managers juggled two park jobs.

The Resource Management Division has a 40 percent vacancy rate – that’s 39 merit positions.

And fees can impede access to and compromise the purpose of parks.

The personnel saga of Colvin Run illustrates the impact of the declining priority given to parks:

- Thirty years ago there were five full time and two part time staff.
- Now the site has 2 full time staff – the site manager and the miller who has unique skills to operate the 1810 grist mill - and 2 part time staff (funded by fees). They are terrific.

Their current activities include:

- 864 students scheduled to visit this spring;
- weekly scout programs;
- nine summer camps;
- additional tours;
- a record amount of grain sold; and
- the Grand Opening of the miller’s house which took place on April 3.

Wonderful work in serving Fairfax county residents. But they can’t do, nor should they be expected to do, the work of five.

I have seen this movie before in the private sector.

A well-regarded firm invests in high quality talent, then cuts the budget by consolidating responsibilities and hiring part time workers. Over time, service deteriorates, the ability to attract and retain top talent begins to fade. What made the firm great is gone.

What is to be done?

About thirty years ago the park’s budget was the equivalent of 2.6 cents of our real estate taxes. Today it is one cent!

Raising it to 2 cents would double the FCPA’s tax-based budget and bring it back to 1.2 percent of the county’s budget - a big step forward.

Give the parks higher priority! Two cents for the parks!

Tunnel to Nowhere

The lack of FCPA funding could make Fairfax County home to a \$1.5 million tunnel to nowhere.

I have written to several of you about VDOT's construction of a pedestrian tunnel at Colvin Run as part of the Route 7 widening project to provide a safe passage to the other half of the park. FCPA indicates that there is no funding for a short trail from south side the tunnel to the Rails to River Trail and wants to wait to plan until the widening project is completed.

This is short sighted.

Any delay would deprive the mill staff of new history and naturalist programing, at a time when revenue generation is ever more important.

Delay would run the very real risk that curious hikers would stomp through protected wetlands directly in front of the tunnel. To avoid this, perhaps the FCPA would close the tunnel.

A very public, expensive tunnel to nowhere.

The trail should be ready when the tunnel is officially open. I welcomed Supervisor Alcorn's visit to explore the grounds and applaud supervisor Foust in agreeing that a connecting trail is a priority. I urge others to take a similar view.



Pedestrian Underpass looking from the north to south side of Colvin Run Park

In closing:

A big thank you for the big wheel!
Give higher priority for parks in the budget!
Avoid a tunnel to nowhere!

Thank you for your kind attention.