

BOS Presentation by James Wallar, Friends of Colvin Run Mill, April 12, 2022

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. I am James Wallar, President of the Friends of Colvin Run Mill, and a member of the Fair Parks Initiative.

I would like to thank you for your support of the parks, and, since it is his last budget hearing, particularly acknowledge the strong and constant support of Supervisor Foust for Colvin Run Mill Park. Thank you, sir!

The Fair Parks Initiative continues to suggest that the park's share of the budget, as presented by the County Executive, revert to one percent of the General Fund, about where it was before more emphasis was placed on park funding through fees – the revenue model.

This year the Alliance is also advocating for specific actions. Rather than review the list, allow me to emphasize a couple of points: the need for more resources for people and trees, otherwise known as “standing people,” as I will explain.

People

People and Pay

I applaud the advertised budget's proposal for a two percent raise for all employees – a market rate adjustment – and increases for merit and longevity pay. I also commend the on-going compression review of wage structures of employees that are no longer consistent with new competitive wage scales. Paying park staff competitive wages is extremely important to attract and retain qualified experts.

Yet wages for part-time staff lag. An advertised position for a back-up miller at Colvin Run pays \$13-16 an hour for a twenty-hour week! That's below a living wage in Fairfax County, and for a position that will require mastering unique skills and knowledge.

Providing the same pay increases that county merit positions are to receive to park staff funded from park-generated revenue will cost \$1.4 million, according to the Park Authority. They add \$500 thousand to the advertised budget estimate of \$958,089 for the market rate adjustment so they can offer competitive pay.

The Park Authority indicates that these pay increases will have to be recaptured through increased fees. Is this the best approach given that the revenue-model is already distorting the purpose of parks and is being studied for possible revision? Increasing fees would only exacerbate the problem of the revenue model. These pay increases should be made from the General Fund.

People and Positions

Also important is ensuring that all park personnel slots are filled. It seems a regular practice to divert funds from staffing to take care of other needs. A sounder budget approach would be to meet those other needs from the General Fund so that all authorized positions can be filled.

Last fall the Resource Management Division – the Division that staffs the parks - had 32 of its 87 positions unfilled. The figure is now lower, but one of the still open positions is for Colvin Run which now has only two full time staff, down from five ten years ago. Not filling those slots mean that park programming and, in the case of Colvin Run, the maintenance of an important historic asset, have suffered, as has revenue generation.

The advertised budget suggests that this practice will continue. The FCPA requested an increase of \$5 million to maintain the same level of service as last year given inflation, new acquisitions, and county initiatives, such as achieving zero waste. The advertised budget provides less than ten percent of this request. To fulfill these requirements even partially, will funds again be diverted from personnel?

People and Mobile Parks

The advertised budget cuts two park staff positions at a time when the Park Authority is seeking more positions.

Two of those requested positions are for mobile nature centers. Taking parks to the people is a wonderful idea. The Friends of Colvin Run have discussed a mobile display of simple machines – a practice old timers say was in place when the park had more staff.

I suggest that two permanent positions be created, one a naturalist, one an historian, to be stationed at permanent parks and then rotate with other experts to staff the mobile parks, one devoted to nature the other to history and culture.

Trees – Also known as “standing people”

Another three positions requested by the Park Authority would be for two tree care specialists and an urban forestry expert.

Why should Colvin Run be interested in trees? Because it is classified as a resource park, featuring both history and nature.

In her book Braiding Sweetgrass botanist Robin Wall Kimmer explains how in her native Indian culture trees are considered part of the community. They are called “the standing people.” Trees provide ecosystem services to the community that are invaluable. They “constitute the environmental quality committee running air and water purification 24/7. They are on every

task force from the historical society picnic to the highway department, school board, and library.”

The BOS has acknowledged as much by pledging to expand the tree canopy to 60 percent in the County wide Energy and Climate Action Plan.

But anyone driving around the county sees quite the opposite. Trees being felled for new buildings and developments. On park land, comprising nine percent of the county’s area, invasive species have choked live trees and cling to dead and dying ones – squeezing out native plants and the birds and insects that thrive on them.

The miller’s house at Colvin Run is camouflaged from Colvin Run Road by dead and dying trees being choked by vines. The south side of Colvin Run Park was once pastureland is now clogged with dead trees and invasives.

It would be nice to think that park forests could take care of themselves – like they do in the wild. But urbanization around these wonderful, live-supporting forests in Fairfax County means that we must take care of them. And the Park Authority needs the resources to properly maintain them for the good of us all.

I understand that discussions have produced some good news. \$500,000 has been found in the Third Quarter Review budget to meet the Park Authority’s initial budget request of \$739,463 for forestry. But this one-time infusion won’t take care of trees for years to come. A more thoughtful approach would be to meet the Park Authority’s request to bring on board three professionals.

Robin Wall Kimmer suggests that trees deserve you and me speaking up on their behalf. And to quote her local council woman, this requires, “Showing up at the damn meeting.” I am showing up.

We should all care for our forests, the “standing people.” Please fully fund the Park Authority’s request.

To wrap up:

- Enact pay salary increases for revenue-based staff from the General Fund.
- Ensure that all Park positions are fully funded.
- Ensure other tasks are adequately funded so resources are not diverted from personnel accounts.
- Authorize a naturalist and historian for permanent parks who could rotate duty in mobile parks.
- Hire staff for forestry needs.

In short, take care of the Park’s people and “standing people,” the trees.

Thank you for your kind attention.

