



Comments from the Friends of Quiet Waters Park to the Proposal to Build a Two-Story, 16,000 Square Foot Office Building in Quiet Waters Park

January 20, 2023

The Friends of Quiet Waters Park (Friends) is a non-profit, all-volunteer organization. The Friends support the Park through community fundraising, volunteer coordination and furthering public education, awareness, research, interest in, and appreciation for the Park.

While the Anne Arundel County Recreation & Parks Department has unilaterally and without explanation opined that the new acquisition was not part of the original park and therefore is not governed by the existing Master Plan, we strenuously disagree and consider any new property to be covered until replaced with a new plan developed through the same process as the original 1988 plan that has guided the Park for more than 33 years.

These comments from the Friends contain 3 sections:

1. The **Context** of the 1988 Master Plan
2. The Friends assessment of how we arrived in the **Current Situation**
3. A **Proposal** for moving forward

1. The Context of the 1988 Master Plan

In 1987, in the midst of a public controversy over a plan to open a 336 acre “Annapolis Neck Park” (later named Quiet Waters Park), Jim Lighthizer, then County Executive, established the Annapolis Neck Park Advisory Committee – consisting of members of the public, elected officials, and representatives of county agencies – to guide the development of the Park. An Advisory Committee of 9 citizens of the area participated fully and fostered broader public input in developing the Master Plan. In July, 1988, the Advisory Committee issued the *Annapolis Neck Park Master Plan* with the full participation of its members and broader input from the public. The public members then transitioned into the Friends of Quiet Waters Park at the opening of the Park in 1990, in part to continue the citizen input that was so essential to the formation of the Park.

From the very beginning, the vision for Quiet Waters Park agreed upon in the Master Plan was to provide “passive recreation, and access to nature for the visitors – a place to enjoy a range of passive activities within a beautiful setting.”

The Report of the Master Planning Process began with a set of Goals and Objectives that included the following language:

- *First, and of greatest concern, is achieving a balance between the natural and the developed environment. Since 52 percent of the site is within the critical area established by Anne Arundel County, careful analysis was given to the uses proposed for this area. The natural areas should be along the site edges, allowing the majority of the site to be undisturbed; the developed environment should be contained primarily in the center of the site, using the cleared areas.*
- *Educating the public about sensitive methods of development within the critical area is also a goal for the Park. Interpretive trails will be used to show why the critical area is environmentally significant.*

Throughout the Master Plan development process, three major points were kept in mind:

- *The intensity of use*
- *The horizontal layout and location of major facilities*
- *The style or image that will be expressed in the park*

Site characteristics were examined in detail. Vegetation, soils, slopes, drainage, wetlands, critical areas, and access were studied. Preliminary studies offered alternative development strategies which were reviewed by the advisory committee. Based on comments received, revisions were made and a final master plan was adopted by the Advisory Committee.

Some pertinent quotes from The Master Plan:

The intensity of use has been limited to passive recreation such as picnicking, hiking, biking, children' play area, rowboating and skating. Activities that are noisy and busy such as ballfields and boat launching ramps have not been included.

The horizontal layout, as shown on the master plan, minimizes disturbance to the site, especially in the critical areas.

During the Park Planning Committee meetings, various interest groups within the community made presentations on specific uses they would like the park to accommodate. The committee evaluated each request for its appropriateness to the Annapolis Neck Park.

The plan has evolved with a classic design theme. It has a more traditional emphasis with two dynamic areas of interest, the waterfront and the central core area. The implementation of this plan over the next two years will give the residents of Anne Arundel County a place to enjoy a range of passive activities within a beautiful setting.

During that time the staff and advisory committee have helped us with important decision making and have been our link with the citizens. As a result of this coordination the master plan presented with this letter has the unanimous support of the advisory committee and staff.

All of this points to a careful, open, and detailed effort to protect the natural features of the Park for the benefit of all the residents, visitors and caretakers of the Park.

Have there been changes and modifications of this plan in the past 30 years? Yes. For example, initially there was intense opposition by neighbors to a performing stage; a small performance platform was used to host concerts. After gaining acceptance by park patrons and neighbors, a larger concert amphitheater was constructed for the safety and comfort of performers and enjoyment by the public for a limited number of concerts.

However, the values inherent in the Master Plan have been intensely defended and maintained by the Friends of Quiet Waters Park for over 30 years. Projects that would undermine those values have been rejected by the County after concerns expressed by the Friends.

A few of the ideas that have not made it into the Park based on the Master Plan and the concerns of The Friends just in the past decade include:

- an eighteen-hole disk golf course complete with large chain mail baskets criss-crossing the foot paths, both through the fields and woods via fairways cleared through the trees.
- A bright blue exercise facility on a fabricated artificial surface in one of the open spaces toward the entrance of the Park.
- A revamped ice rink with a roof (that would have been for the sole use of a private hockey league for most of the day Saturday and certain other times).
- A boat ramp in the cove down the hill from the Holly Pavilion, with a launching road/ramp surrounding the pavilion and trailer parking taking over the parking lot behind the concert stage
- A sculling facility and boat house for private use by rowing clubs in the same location, destroying a pristine cove.

Without the Friends furthering the values in the Master Plan, there would be no rotating, professionally-juried art exhibits and likely few sculptures in the park, and no Art@the Park Fall arts & crafts festival. The summer concerts might still continue but under county procurement and event guidelines making it more difficult and arduous for performers, the butterfly reading garden would not exist, many amenities would not be in the park including the patio and porch furniture, utility vehicle for the rangers (and pickup truck that is now gone), Tribute Tree, memorial tree/bench program, and many other aspects that people have forgotten were purchased or supported by the Friends, but which are now taken for granted.

The Friends consider that The Master Plan is not only still in effect, but provides contemporary guidance into any additions made to the park. The purpose of a Plan is to guide decisions that are controversial and to protect the principles of the Park to benefit the community. The Master Plan was not developed on a whim, but with elected political leadership and substantial investment of time, effort and funds. It would be hubris and folly for those now with responsibility for the Park to ignore it because it is inconvenient to the demands of a project that has not even been vetted properly with public involvement.

When the Friends asked at the only public meeting about the proposed building plans– held on Halloween night – why the Master Plan principles were not adhered to in this case, we were told that “this is an addition, that plan does not apply here and anyway, it's outdated.” That strikes us as a specious argument. The land we are talking about *is* in the Park, it was donated in its entirety to the Park. It has already been incorporated into the Park. The current Master Plan clearly applies to it and the impacts of the proposed project on the established Park.

2. The Current Situation

The acquisition of the Retreat Property in 2019 promised to be a pure enhancement of the Park, with the modest use of the few *existing* structures on that land by an environmental group with goals consistent with the preservation and use of the Park. It was so described to the public by the County and endorsed as a concept by the Friends. Until a presentation to the Friends in March 2022 (requested by the park superintendent, not volunteered by the developers), neither the public, nor the Friends, realized the extent to which the Retreat Property had, in the interim, morphed into a significantly different project. Several objections were raised by the Friends during that March presentation, but we were told that we would have an opportunity to comment in the future and not to share any of the plans or information with others since it was still in draft and subject to change.

No longer are we talking simply about modest use of the existing few structures on the adjacent new land with goals compatible with preservation and use of the Park; we are facing a complete reordering of the relationship between the two properties:

- Now, an office building - the Earl Conservation Center – designed by and for the use of a private organization, is to be built on that land and the established Park itself must be altered to support the users of that building.
- Now the developers of this office building – a conservation organization – must obtain 3 conservation-related variances to build within the critical area, remove trees, and manage construction in the floodplain.
- Now, the main Park will be encumbered by a road from the new office building through the Park, slicing through the open space of the concert stage hill with traffic running across the hill where trees now stand.
- Now, areas of the Park will be paved over for parking spaces for the office building’s tenants, subtenants, and attendees to private fundraising events.

- Now, a memorial grove of trees may have to be removed.
- Now, existing trails will have to be altered and intersected by the road and traffic traveling to the building.
- Now, the Park's hours of use may have to be bent to allow for users of the office building and vehicles at all hours, raising issues of safety and security.
- Now, congestion at the park entrance will increase.

All of this makes our beloved Park and the public who pays tax and user fees subordinate to the demands and activities of the private tenants of the planned office building, not to mention the additional cost of an estimated \$5M in county funds allocated to make all of these adaptations and the further cost of maintaining them.

It was the responsibility of the County to identify for the public – including the Friends – that the nature of the project and its impact on the Park fundamentally changed since its inception and to provide meaningful opportunities for dialogue and comment. This did not happen.

3. A proposal for moving forward

At this point the Friends agree with the Annapolis Neck Peninsula Federation that a rationale definitely exists in calling for “no new construction of an office building for private use in the county’s most-prized, popular and beloved public park.” The Friends call attention to the proposal that County Executive Pittman instead offer the Chesapeake Conservancy and other aligned environmental groups space together at the new Crownsville Park being *redeveloped*, where their collaboration could take place and their missions and values better expressed and urge its serious consideration. The Retreat land within the Park could be designated the “Earl Conservation Area ” with wayside markers to educate the public about the importance of the critical area.

We also call for the County Executive to create a similar process to the one used to develop the first Master Plan and **appoint a Public Commission chaired by citizens containing representatives of county government and at least 9 members of the public including FQWP** to produce an updated Master Plan for Quiet Waters Park. All decisions about permitting and construction must be put on hold until this Commission delivers its recommendations.

In closing, the Friends of Quiet Waters Park urge the citizens of this region and the users and lovers of the Park to unite in protecting our Park from the impacts of this proposal on the Chesapeake Bay, the land and creatures who inhabit the Park now, and the future citizens of this region who deserve the carefully-planned and managed legacy that was handed down to us.