

To: Alexandria City Council
From: James B. Rapp, Fort Ellsworth Condominium,
110 Roberts Lane, #101, Alexandria, VA 22314, (703) 836-4273
Subject: Open Space—Masonic Temple Grounds
Date: June 21, 2004

My name is Jim Rapp, I am a long-time resident of Fort Ellsworth Condominiums (www.fortellsworth.us), a garden type multi-unit complex contiguous to the George Washington Masonic Temple grounds.

As follows are my thoughts and positions on designating and preserving the Masonic Temple Grounds as open space. These positions are mine, and do not represent Fort Ellsworth Condominiums, however, having independently spoken to many residents, I do believe they reflect an overall resident consensus.

In general, I support the concept of preserving open space, although I must say I am often leery when a property is effectively put on a target list, wondering if it simply highlights it for developers and others. Then too, I sometimes wonder what the motivations for use by various members of the Open Space Steering Committee/City are. Do they want to somehow force the Temple to use their land in a certain manner, or concoct some mandated use detrimental to local residents should the city at some point take all or a portion over?

The Masonic Temple is truly an Alexandria landmark and institution. What makes the Temple special is not simply the monument, but the surrounding grounds which both frame the structure, and offer a sense of pastoral solitude for nearby and indeed all Alexandria residents. The Temple and grounds are quite historic, as a civil war fort (Fort Ellsworth) once sat on them, Orville Wright made a historic over grounds flight, and today archaeological digs take place. As such, I applaud the notion of preserving the back 9 acres that abut Fort Ellsworth property as open space.

From Fort Ellsworth's inception in the early 1970's to around 1999 the Mason's allowed a gate in order for residents from Fort Ellsworth and Shuter's Hill to access the land. I remember the bliss of walking around the grounds, or occasionally flying a kite during springtime. However, in the mid-1990's the back 9 acres were 'discovered', and multitudes of residents from around the city came to walk their dogs. This led to the grass becoming emaciated. This, coupled with fear of liability lawsuits for dog attacks, led the Masons to ban dogs and close the entry fence to Fort Ellsworth, Shuter's Hill and Upland Street. In short public overuse and abuse ruined access for local residents.

Thus, I would like to see the City seek to preserve the back 9 acres should the Masons ever decide to sell all or part of it, however, the City (and Open Space Steering Committee) should tread carefully in specifying such land use, keeping in mind the disaster which occurred when throngs of residents descended on the property with their dogs. Also, personal and political agendas should not enter into the mix by those seeking to do good by preserving the grounds, but thinking they know best how it should be used.

As for the Masons, I do wish they might consider trying to work in a cooperative manner with their surrounding neighbors at Fort Ellsworth and Shuter's Hill, allowing better access by reopening the access gate, while establishing reasonable ground rules for use.

Thank you.