

STATEMENT TO THE ALEXANDRIA CITY COUNCIL
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My name is Gary Carr and I came to speak on tracks, running tracks, and the lack thereof.

I did not set out to be an advocate for running tracks. I simply was looking for a pleasant place to jog, a place where by daughter could safely learn how to ride a bike, and later to hone her competitive running skills. I looked around my community and discovered there was not one quality *public* running track. None.

I have lived here long enough to remember when there was a track at George Washington Middle School. It had fallen into disrepair, but nonetheless it was always in use. When the school was renovated the track went away replaced by an misaligned path. The track at Hammond Middle School after its renovation- just a pathetic trail. At Minnie Howard nothing. For the many years that TC Williams High School has been under construction the track was closed. Until just recently when the track partially reopened, in the entire city, there was none.

The children have nowhere to run, and we have nowhere to hide.

Let me say this as succinctly as I can. The running tracks at the city schools are pathetic and more to the point are hurting our children. I spoke about the issue to sensitive and well informed people, and frankly expected it to be resolved. Time and again I was met with a curious indifference. No indignant parents or outraged coaches, or P.E. Teachers. So, I thought I would write a paragraph or two about it. I ended up writing five pages. That is when the running track issue became both metaphorical and allegorical.

The metaphor is "Separate but Equal", the allegory is the "Emperors New Clothes"

There was a time in this nation's history when "Separate but equal" was the law of the land. There were two school systems one black and one white, separate and unequal. Well that was once acceptable in Alexandria, Mississippi, indeed it was even acceptable in Alexandria, Virginia. But thank God it is no longer acceptable.

But there are still two school systems in Alexandria, Virginia- one private and one public, and to our credit for the most part they are relatively equal. Equal in my mind accepting one glaring example- running tracks. I will issue a simple challenge. Drive over to Hammond Middle School, get out your car a walk around what passes for a track there. They have figured out how the pyramids are built, so maybe you can figure out why they built an elementary play area into a middle school track and field. Then get in your car drive a half a mile or so to St. Stephen Drive and turn right. Take a look at the track that is there. What you will see is separate and profoundly unequal. I am not interested in class warfare, I'm interested in class "be fair". When you go tour of city's track facilities, take a politician with you, take an activist or an educator. But for Goodness sake don't take a child. For they will tell you what should be obvious- the emperor that is our public school system has no clothes.

The emperor has no clothes because we have spent 100 million for the new T.C. Williams High School and have budgeted a paltry \$200,000 for "restoration" the track, when it should be completely renovated, and able to support home track and field events as is spelled out in the Athletic Master plan. The emperor has no clothes because we are set to spend \$20 million on an all-City sport stadium and it has no track. There is a 22 million dollar "comprehensive" Field Master Plan, that by any measure should be the "Track and Field Master Plan" and it has but one scant footnote on a running track. Project after project proposed, all the while there is not one quality running track in the City of Alexandria.

One of the "ten best cities" for children in the United States, but the emperor has no clothes.

When I talk about running tracks, other outdoor facilities are quickly mentioned. What about Tennis, Basketball, Baseball, Football, Soccer, or Lacrosse. I have no quarrel with any of these endeavors, but honestly, how many patrons do they serve. Tennis 2 maybe 4, baseball 9, basketball 10, all the other field sports no more than 25. Significantly, all these sports have vocal constituencies. In comparison, how many patrons does a running track serve? A hundreds, even thousands easily- 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And they do this without diminishing our field inventory one iota. They in fact complement and amplify all other outdoor recreation activities. Additionally, they are a big undervalued economic asset. Nothing else even comes close. But tracks have no constituency, so we are running on empty.

Running tracks are different in another way. Statistically, no sport has more than a 10% of the population who are avid participants. Running is no different. Where running tracks are different is that in addition to serving all the other sports, they foster a sense of community. I do not need to delineate to you the demographics of soccer, or basketball or lacrosse. They are self defining, and fortunately in a totally non-discriminatory fashion. At a track you find every socio-economic group, every ethnic group, every age group- no other type of facility or activity can say this. I'll see grandmothers and little babies at a track, while they will never set foot on any of our fields. If you have ever been to a track & field event, the energy of youth is palpable in the air. The two school system I mentioned, the public and private one's that so rarely interact- a citywide track and field event would allow for all of the city's children to compete- something that neither occurs nor is being contemplated.

I have this vision of an Iraq war veterans who have lost a limb in defense of our freedoms coming here to train for a marathon or special Olympics. "Really nice tracks you have here" they would say. I could smile and reply "the best in the region." I have a vision of the banner "State Champion- Track and Field" again being hoisted at the new T.C. Williams High School Gymnasium.

We have lost a generation of runners, both competitively and casually. Let us not lose another while we simultaneously lament our children's obesity and lack of physical fitness.

I have much more to say, but in sum- "If you build it, they will run."

If you would indulge me for one more minute. Pontification without explanation is just hot air. What is at the root of the problem that running tracks represent? How were they able to fall into such a state of disrepair? To get to the basis you have to look at how interdependent, yet independent city entities operate. To get the answer, I called on the Schools-Recreation Coordinator. Fifty percent of the field inventory in the city is on school property and the schools are dependent on the Recreation Department for maintenance of the fields? Surely they is a contact point for these two organizations. How about before and after school programming. Surely there must be someone who coordinates these most essential activities. Have you ever met the Schools/Recreation Coordinator at the School Board, or the Recreation/Schools Coordination at City Hall? No, because they don't exist, but are sorely needed. Someone needs to be designated whose responsibility it is to coordinate activities by these two important agencies. For things like scheduling, maintenance, projects, publicity and programming. One central location for every related service. We need to align their objectives and in the end we will benefit with real cost savings, better facilities and programming.

Mandate a coordinators between recreation department and school system and have them submit a quarterly report on what has been accomplished in synchronizing their activities.