

Mr. Mayor and Members of Council, my name is Gary Carr, and I rise as an advocate of running and the construction of running tracks to combat the plague of this generation, childhood obesity.

First I would, on this day after Veterans Day, like to thank the men and women of the United States Armed Forces for their defense of our freedoms, and giving me the ability to speak before you today with out fear of retribution. Specifically to my brother, Major Regis Carr, USAF, who is just now coming home from a second tour in Iraq, and to all of the soldiers who have served, deepest my gratitude. As a veteran myself, the son a man who received a Purple Heart in Korea, and the great great grandson of a man who served in the Black Brigade of Cincinnati during the Civil War, I salute you.

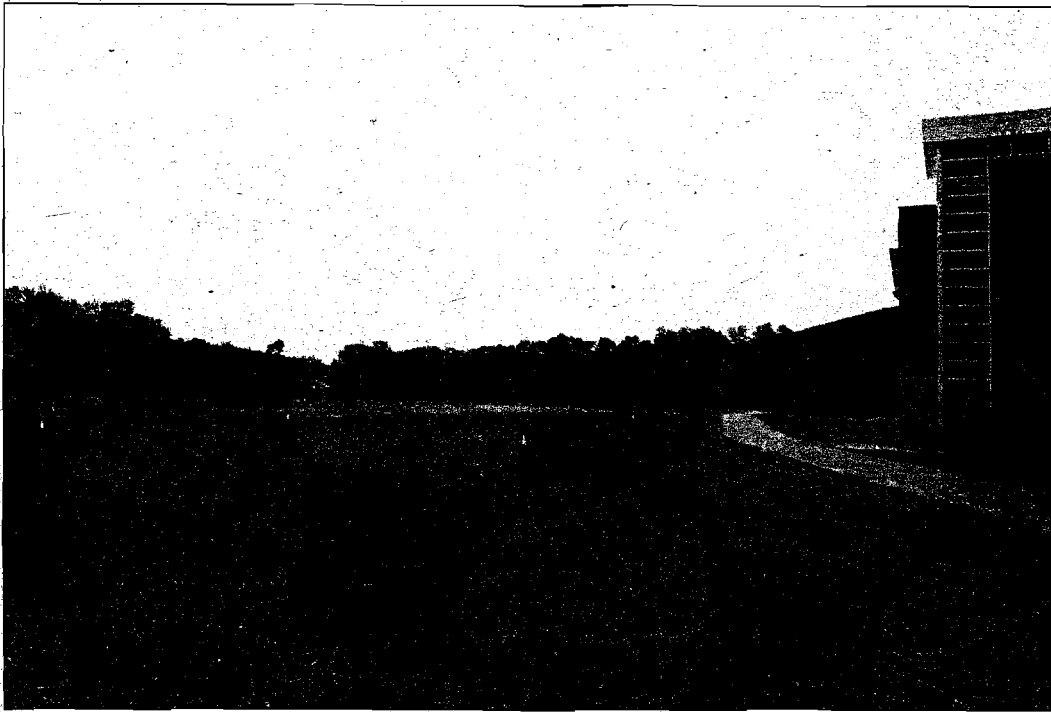
While I have spoken on many occasions of the need for running areas for the children of this city, in the back of mind I think of the wounded warriors, some with grievous injuries, also looking for a place to run. For those veterans I also make this case, for I know from experience, soldiers run.

Alexandria, a city which once had four running tracks, now has none. I say none because the one track in the city, at our high school, with the recent onset of daylight saving time, is in the dark by five o'clock. It is off-limits during daylight hours, and in total darkness by the time most people get off work. Without even the most basic of safety lighting, this valuable physical fitness asset, costing millions of dollars, is useless to the majority of this community, *and* a potential safety hazard. It is a crying shame that such a situation has been allow to persist, given such an obvious unmet need. The primary reasons for rejection into the Armed Services is obesity related.

I am reminded of a scene in the movie *Remember the Titans*, where Coach Boone says, "Don't patronize these kids. You're crippling them. Especially the black ones. You're crippling them for life." And so it is, we have one of the highest childhood obesity rates in the region. As you search for answers, you are presented with a reasonable, cost effective solution that benefits the entire community, not just the participants in field sports, and you fail to act. You have been too quick to accept the "won't fit, can't do it" answer. Witter Field being the latest example. Instead you should light a fire under somebody, and say the leadership of this city refuses to accept the status quo of obesity. Ask how to make this happen, not what we can't do. Or they will be crippled for life.

I look forward to the day, when I encounter a veteran at one of the running tracks in this city. And hope they stop long enough for me to thank them for a job well done. For if we built them, they will run.

A bright idea?



PHOTO/DERRICK PERKINS

The vast field at Francis Hammond Middle School has needed improvements for years, but a coming synthetic athletic field will include 60-foot lights some Seminary Hill residents don't appreciate.

Hammond Middle School, neighbors spar over lights at new athletic field

BY DERRICK PERKINS

The Alexandria Board of Zoning Appeals ruled against two appeals to a plan to erect 60-foot lights at Francis Hammond Middle School's athletic field Thursday, though the case may end up in court.

In a unanimous vote, the BZA upheld a split decision by the Planning Commission granting Alexandria City Public Schools a permit for the project in June, having confirmed Planning Director Farol Hamer correctly interpreted local ordinances relating to additional height and density.

Neighbors and members of the Seminary Hill Association had hoped the board would scuttle the planned improvements, which they say will create a nuisance and bring down the value of nearby homes.

When — and if — finished, the roughly \$1.6 million project will leave the Seminary Road school with a new track, artificial field and lights. Supporters say the newly renovated field will expand the city's recreational capacity for students and residents alike.

"The school board is in a difficult position," said former chairwoman Yvonne Folkerts at a community meeting addressing the issue in April. "Enrollment is going up by leaps and bounds and has new demands that must be met to provide proper facilities for Alexandria's youth."

Nancy Jennings, SHA president, believes project opponents have been unfairly tarred as taking a stance against children's recreational programs or student athletics. They're not against building a new artificial field and illuminating athletic fields in general, she said, they're against lights at the middle

school.

"If it was six football games a year, I don't think that's unbearable, but you're talking about lights on a field for every day until 10 p.m. at night," Jennings said. "The groups that come, they bring cars, they bring vendors with food and PA systems to do the play-by-play and I think its bizarre a neighborhood would put up with that."

Neighbors had asked the BZA to rule on a third issue regarding a city law regulating light pollution and the board effectively said neither they nor Hamer had any authority over the ordinance, Jennings said. They believe the proposed lights will be powerful enough to exceed the maximum limit of measure allowed on side or rear yards of adjacent properties.

Some light testing has been done, said Deputy Planning Director Barbara Ross, but only in the front yards

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of abutters where light is not limited, but rather encouraged. Early computer models show illumination from the proposed lights will range from .18 to .44 footcandles — a measurement that tracks light intensity. The limit allowed in front and side yards is .25 footcandles, according to the city's code.

And if future testing in neighbors' rear and side yards — required before construction can begin — shows the

light levels going above the .25 limit, ACPS will have to return to the drawing board.

That's the law, Ross said.

"In our position we acknowledge this is a law and it applies in this case," she said. "Before you get them up there and turn them on ... we would require final photometrics. It's required on every development. At the final site stage, and before they can build, they have to show us that all the information they have then [indicates] the lighting will be adequate."

While the BZA sided with the city, the project may not be out of the woods yet. Once

the board formalizes its findings at its November 10 meeting, the middle school's neighbors have 30 days to appeal to circuit court.

Jennings won't speak for the association as a whole, but said she would prefer finding a solution outside of court.

"I'd rather meet with the school system and talk about it — what is it they really want and what can we work out as a compromise," she said. "Maybe they reconsider and if they reconsider we don't have to go to court. We could reconsider with them."

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"PRC is opposed to making concessions (such as agreeing to turn the lights off by 9 p.m. instead of 10 p.m.) — the argument for the lights will need to be clearly stated and supported as without a willingness to make concessions it will appear we did not listen to the community at the first meeting," Durham stated.

While Putzu considers the email evidence of city staff colluding to gin up support for the project, Jim Spengler, director of the parks department, considers it part of his staff's job. They're stating the facts, he said; the two volunteer commissions were working to ensure supporters turned out for the next public meeting and neither the commissions nor his department had any intention of negotiating.

"We're not presenting any concessions and the planning staff is not presenting any concessions ... The city and the school board are in the position of being the applicants because the property is owned and managed jointly, so the applicants have the responsibility to advocate the position that they want," Spengler said. "Why be an applicant for something and then advocate something else?"

In fact, Spengler's department may have more to gain than ACPS. Multiple city-funded studies in the prior decade show demand for field time outpacing the supply, and lights are seen as a way to increase capacity. The Hammond field was next on the list, Spengler said.

But ACPS was more interested in a new field than lights, according to an email from Deputy Planning Director Barbara Ross to Planning Director Farol Hamer and Assistant City

Manager Mark Jinks in November 2010.

"I spoke with Mark Krause at [ACPS] and learned that the lights at Hammond idea [was] because [the parks department] has an absolute policy that in every instance where a field is being replaced with artificial turf, lights must be added for nighttime activities," Ross wrote. "The schools are paying for the field work and lights at Hammond but want it to be very clear that lights are not required for a middle school program. If parks were not insisting, they would not be doing it."

The most fervent supporter of the lights may have been Judy Noritake, of the park and recreation commission. When Hamer floated the idea of delaying the planning commission vote until the fall, Noritake dismissed the director's concerns.

"This is exactly what the neighborhood wants," she wrote May 20. "Delay is their friend. We will never have the lights there [if] this waits. That is my view."

In a second email days later, addressed to Hamer and planning commission Chairman John Komoroske, Noritake further outlined her concerns. If the light proposal at Hammond fails, lighting other city athletic fields will become more difficult, she wrote.

"Hammond is the line in the sand for a part of our community who is stuck on our city remaining ... suburban when that time is long gone," Noritake wrote. "It will hobble efforts not just here but in other locations where the installations of lights is critical to meeting the current and future recreational needs."

Noritake also asks Komoroske if he'd be willing to talk about the project over the phone. It's not the only time Komoroske is mentioned discussing the proposal with interested

parties before his commission was set to vote on it. In a June 1 email with Superintendent Morton Sherman, then school board chairwoman Yvonne Folkerts mentions talking about the project with Komoroske and Noritake.

There's nothing wrong with members of the planning commission speaking with applicants, be they private entities or city agencies, prior to a vote, said Christopher Spera, assistant city attorney.

Still, his office recommends those conversations be disclosed to the public whenever possible.

Komoroske admits not publicly mentioning his conversations with Folkerts and Noritake. The heads of most city boards meet regularly to coordinate efforts, he said. Regardless of the applicant, speaking with them beforehand is a commissioner's way of doing "homework," Komoroske said.

"Some people might say it's a conspiracy, but to me, the worst thing you can do is have uncoordinated projects go on through the city," he said. "You find out what other departments are doing and you find out what your department is doing with them ... One person's coordination is another person's conspiracy."

Putzu doesn't describe the close coordination as a conspiracy, but he is concerned about the level of cooperation between city boards and departments, including the planning commission.

"I was just very disappointed with the decision-making," he said. "I still believe the crux of this problem is the city assumed the role as both applicant and oversight [body] and drew no distinction between the two ... No one is alleging a conspiracy. I think the problem is the culture, it's a culture of arrogance."

Emails reveal City Hall crafted strategy to light up Hammond field

Many neighbors oppose lights, but city policy is to enhance recreation

BY DERRICK PERKINS

Until a friend phoned from City Hall last winter, Frank Putzu had no idea school officials were pushing ahead with a project to erect lights on a Francis Hammond Middle School field.

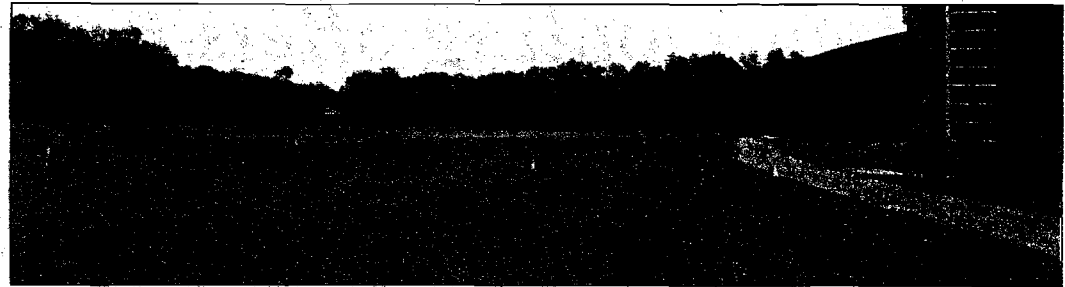
Like many of his neighbors in Seminary Hill, Putzu knew about — and approved of — a project to replace the school's dusty soccer field two blocks from his house with artificial turf. He didn't know about the 60-foot lights until Alexandria City Public Schools' application for a permit ended up on the planning commission's spring docket,

long after Seminary Hill residents thought the field was a done deal.

When it was first included in the school district's proposed capital improvement budget, the roughly \$1.6-million project omitted lights. The neighborhood was surprised to learn officials introduced the idea during a mid-winter meeting in 2010.

"The initial reaction was surprise and disbelief as a result of that [proposed] budget document," said Putzu, a past president of the Seminary Hill Association and former member of the city's board of zoning appeals. "We thought that had already been resolved."

Despite Seminary Hill's opposition, the planning commission approved the field, complete with lights, in a 4-2



PHOTO/DERRICK PERKINS

The vast field at Francis Hammond Middle School has needed improvements for years, but a coming synthetic athletic field will include 60-foot lights some Seminary Hill residents don't appreciate.

vote in June.

Around that time, Seminary Hill's members used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain documents and emails between city staff and members of several instrumental boards and commissions pushing the project.

While the documents don't reveal any illegal actions, they lay out a concerted, behind-the-scenes effort to approve the project, raising

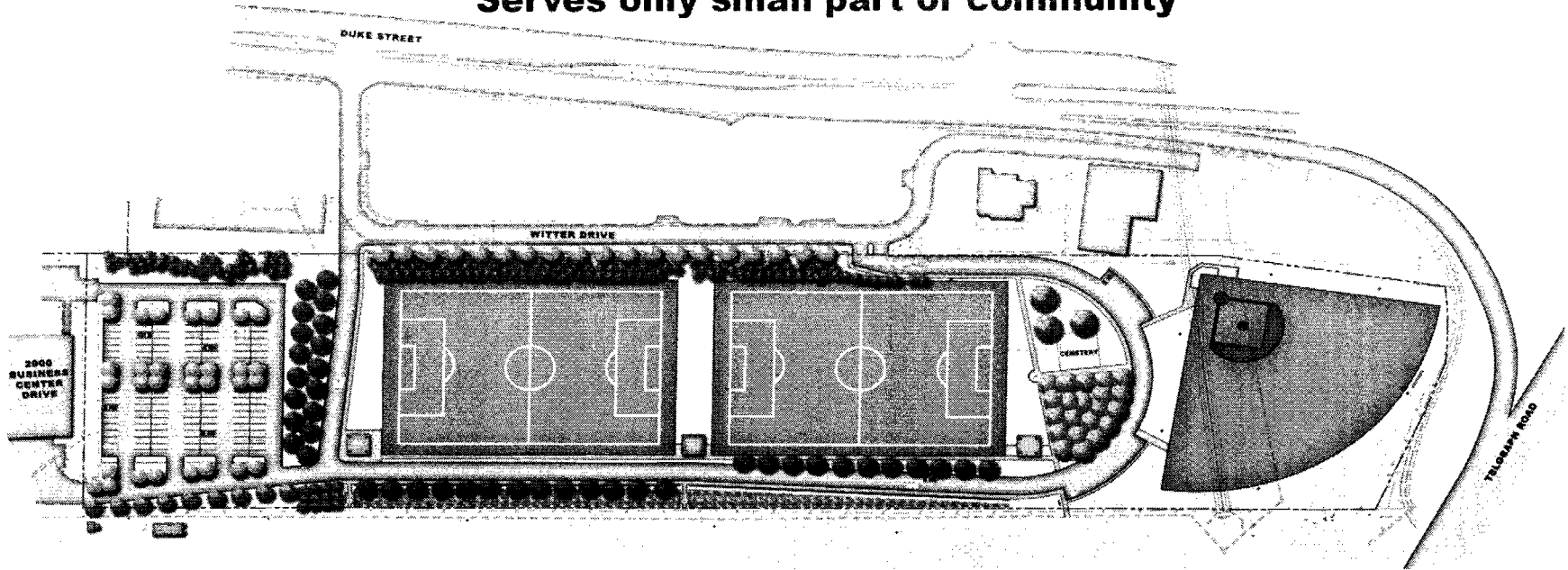
serious concerns for Putzu and his neighbors.

Months after the first community meeting, which Putzu described as a "disaster," Dana Wedeles, an urban planner with the parks department, emailed co-worker Laura Durham with an update on the department's coordination with the resident-comprised sports and parks and recreation commissions heading into a public meeting.

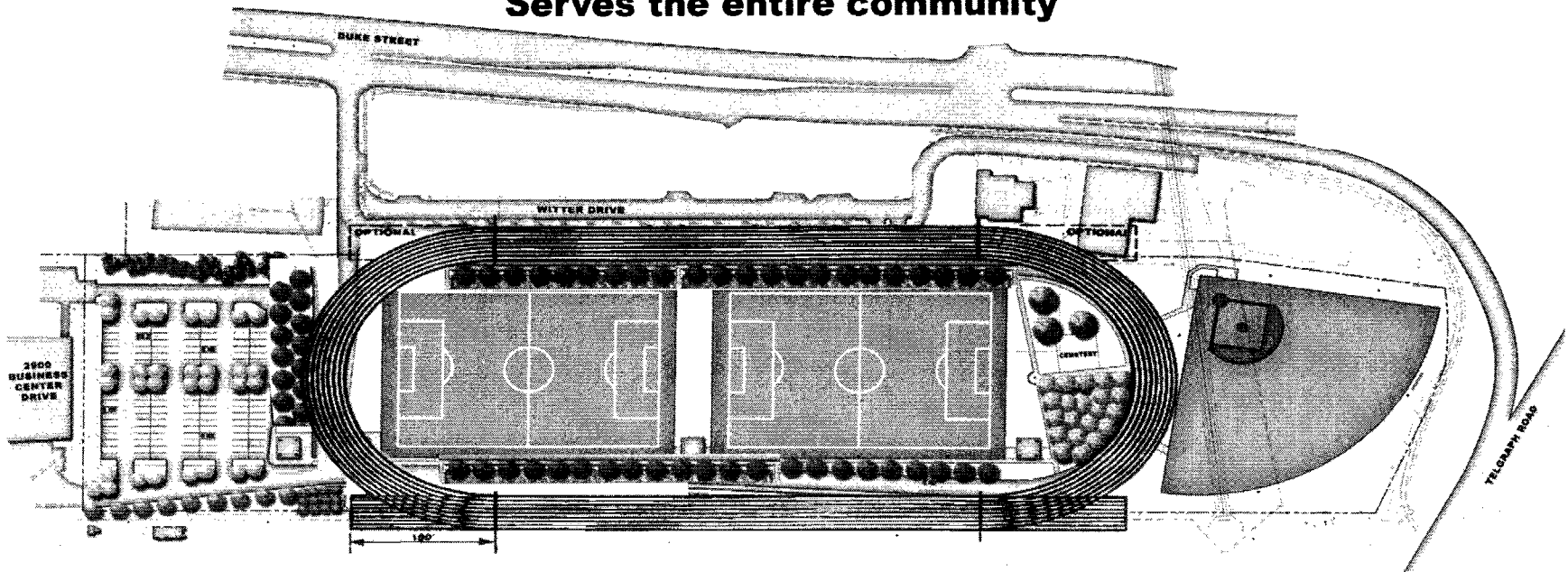
"[N]eighbors are in strong opposition to lights (noise, litter, lights shining on house, traffic) and they are supported by residents that are opposing lights at T.C. Williams. The [park and recreation commission] and sports commission are working to ensure supporters of the lights are in attendance ... and are willing to speak," Wedeles wrote.

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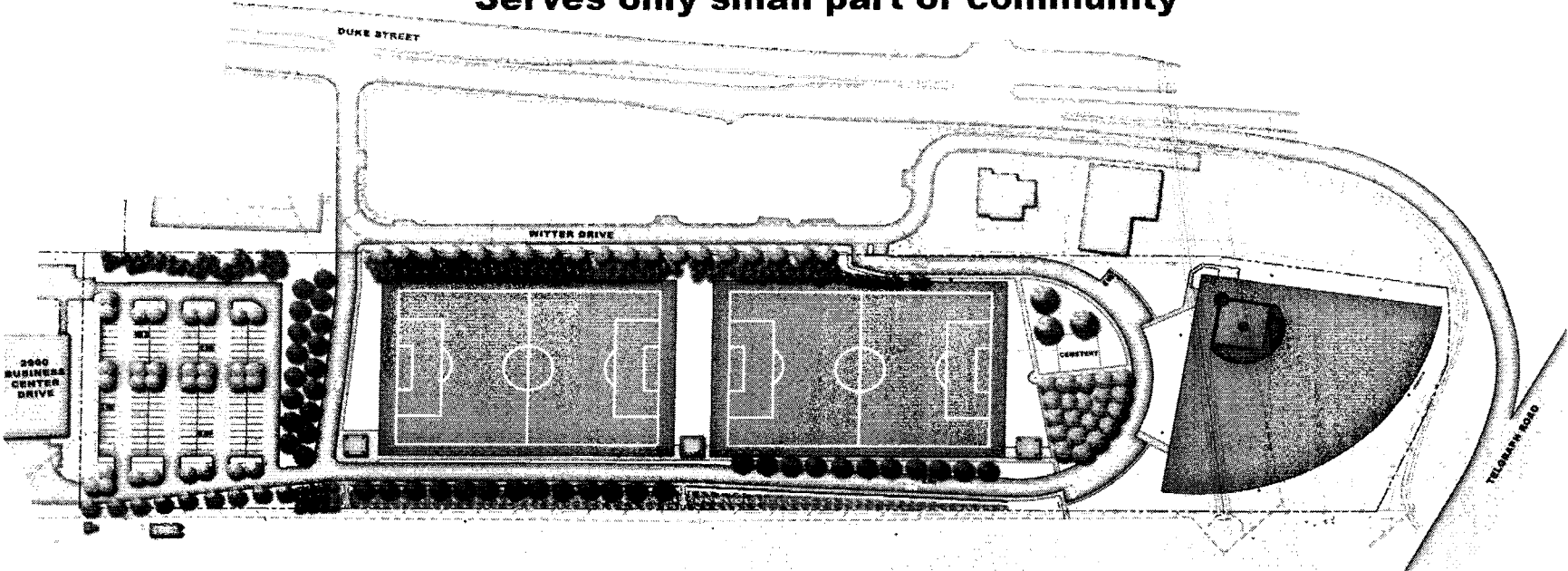
**Current Witter Field Design
Serves only small part of community**



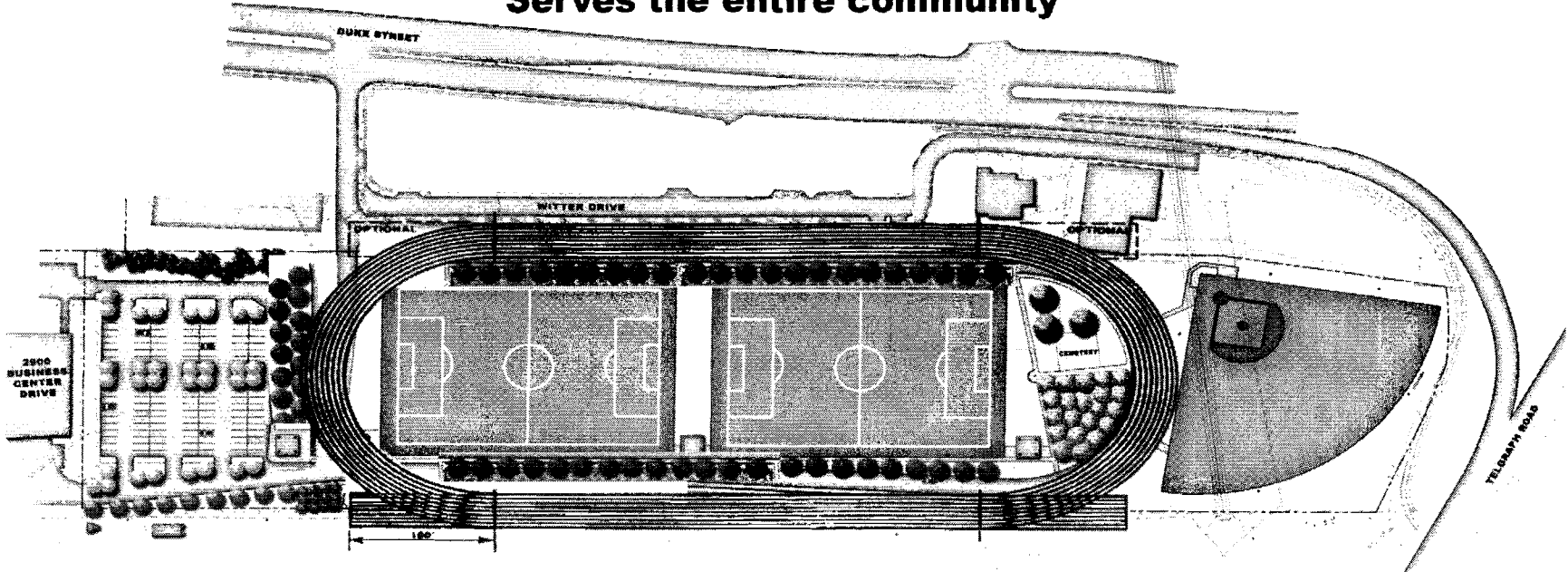
**Witter Field with a Running Track
Serves the entire community**



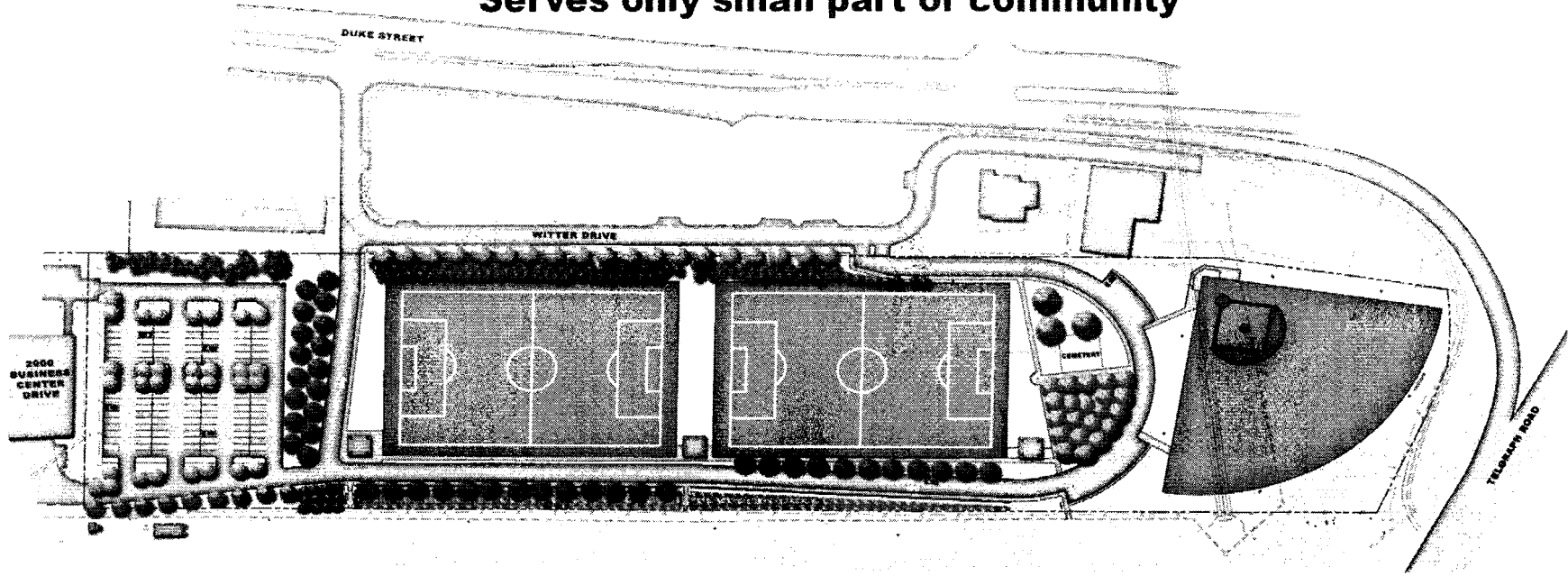
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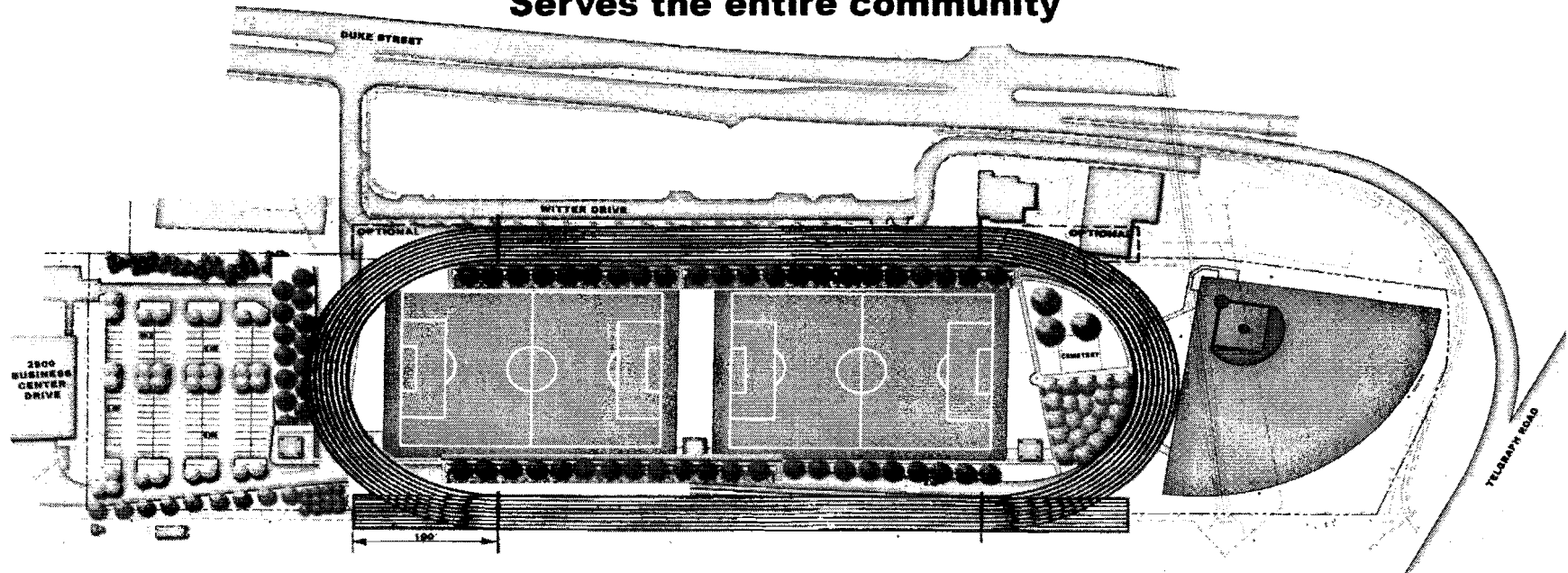
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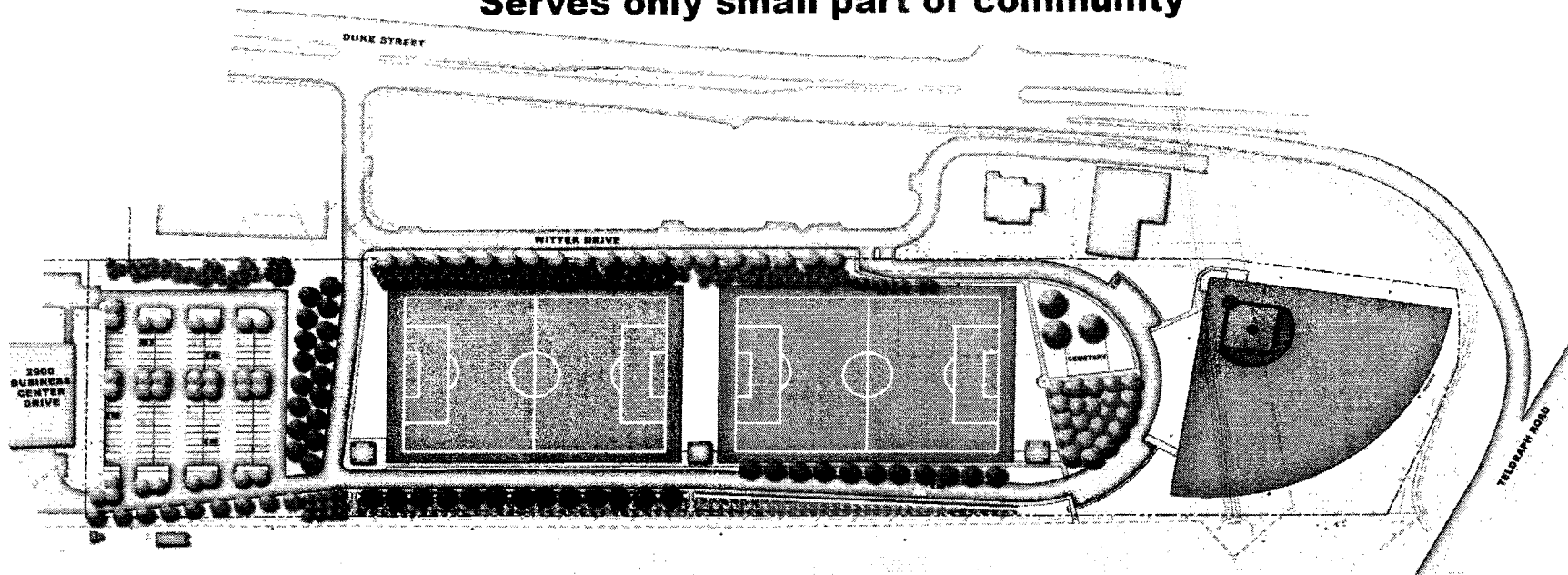
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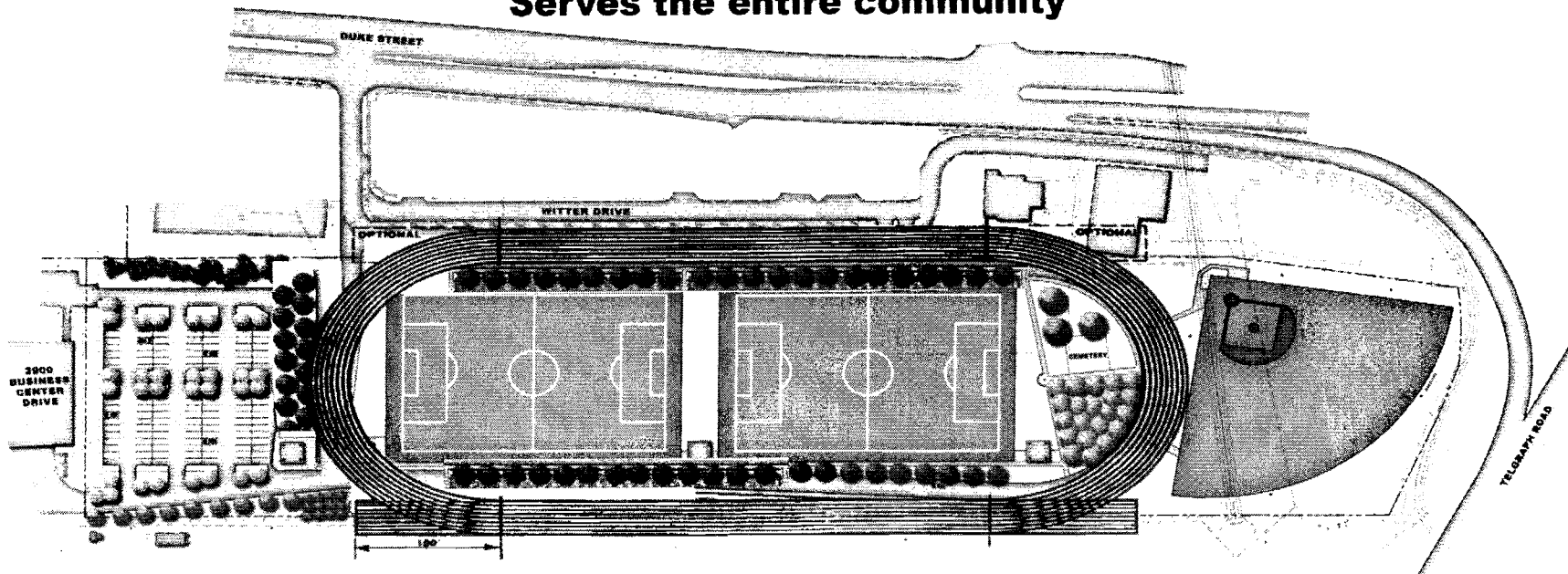
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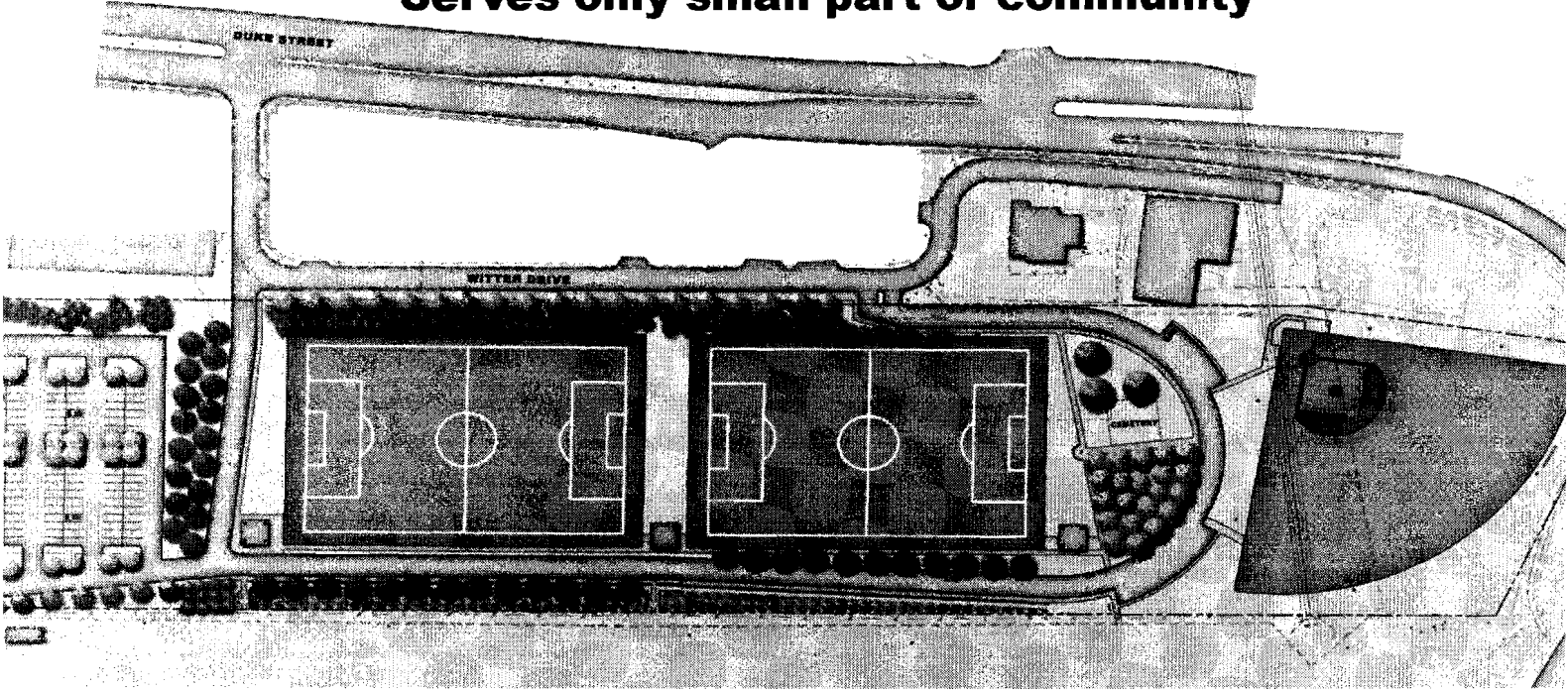
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Letter to the Editor of the Alexandria Times
by Gary Carr October 31, 2011

This letter is in response to your the articles published in the October 20th and 27th issues of the Alexandria Times regarding the installation of lights at Hammond Middle School field.

The decision to add lights to the field at Hammond Middle School has be ruled on by the board of Zoning Appeals. It is a reasonable judgment that while allowing the project to move forward but balances the rights of neighbors with the needs of the community. It requires additional study of the lightning's impact to assure it is in compliance with relevant statutes. It should be approved by City Council after compliance with the additional recommended studies. This is a appeal for compromise on the part of all concern parties to avoid further legal squabbles, and come to a mutually beneficial agreement. It is the children that ultimately suffer from the arguments if adults.

My interest in this matter is the health and well being of the children of Alexandria, I have no other motivation. My basic contention is that this is a school, and as such the children who attend there should have a full opportunity to benefit from its resources. Further, that the people who live in close proximity to the facility should recognize it as an important community facility that necessitates, indeed requires, compromise by neighboring property owners.

So when I hear objections to a site plan, variances from setback requirements, and illumination restrictions, and a "extraordinary new SUP request", I pause and say -"but this is a school".

When it's claimed that this was falsely advertised as a existing field, and is in fact a new field that diminishes property values? I again say- "but this is a school".

Was it "wrongful and illegal" to grant this SUP to the ACPS when it is for the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA) which the appellant describes as the "true applicant". Is it invalid because of an "erroneous and reversible" determination.

To say that this facility, or any other, can have "no adverse impact" while disregarding or minimizing a known public good, is a standard no project is fully able to meet. The appellant's want of a study of the impact of housing values resultant from being directly across from a school is simply not reasonable. The amount of variables is simply too great, and any conclusion is tempered by the fact that this was known to be a school facility for over fifty years.

Why is appellant and the Seminary Hills Association (SHA) so crucial to this argument. Because Hammond Middle School and every high school, public and private in Alexandria is within, or on the periphery, of the SHA's boundaries. Why is that the case? Because of its strategic location in the center of the the city, uniting its eastern Old Town and newer West End area neighborhoods- and with great location comes great responsibility. The appellant cites a negative impact of property values from lighting to a private high school, not a public school. Therefore the basis of comparison is abstract. The school has been located there for more than fifty years, and as with living in a flood plain this was a known, or should have be known potentiality.

The appellant complaint cites increased litter, trash, noise and traffic. While every effort should be make to mitigate these conditions, this is a school in an urban environment. There is nowhere else to put this facility. The complaint perhaps should also include restricting big yellow buses, full of children, arriving and leaving twice a day. The complaints reference the need of a helicopter landing

site it frankly specious. The negative impact to the response time of fire and rescue, with a firehouse across the street, has been deemed inconsequential. Sorry to say, the cited “suburban residential character” of this area is a thing of the past.

That appellant’s claims that ACPS “currently enjoys reasonable beneficial use of Hammond's (Upper Field)” is patently absurd. The field suffers from poor drainage, easily floods, and remains unusable for days after it rains. It has a compacted clay surface that turns to mud with minimal usage. The biggest repudiation of this claim is this- children simply rarely use the field. That should say it all.

The contention that Lower Hammond is a viable alternative is unrealistic. It would take minimum of 20 minutes for school children to travel to and from the Lower Field round- trip which is 300 yards away and isolated from the school proper. The children would spend more time traversing the field than they would playing. Additionally, it would make supervisory oversight difficult, if not impractical. Furthermore, the cost are simply prohibitive, nearly three to four times as much under some estimates.

The Seminary Hills Association claims an “interest in Hammond from its founding”. That Hammond was segregated its entire existence as a high school may not be germane to this discussion, but is a statement of fact. The story of “Remember the Titans” is in essence a story about Hammond. In fact a significant number of children in zoned for Hammond go to its several of Alexandria's private schools. For many without a vested interest in the public schools, a circumstantial case could be made that there has been a conscious effort to restrict the usage of public school assets for extracurricular activities. The condition of Hammond field for nearly a decade is exhibit A.

I, for one, am a part of this debate for the furtherance of use of this facility by the public children of Alexandria. I don't make this case about adult sports, or the needs of the Parks and Recreation Departement beyond the needs of this City's youth. Lighting of this facility is essential to have a year round sports program, its that simple.

The SHA motto is to “promote the general welfare of the City of Alexandria”. Its charter, requires them to seek a compromise on this issue. In the spirit of compromise to what the appellant calls a “deeply flawed rational” that the field and lights are clearly a part of a public school facility and that the school is a proxy for the recreation department. The City must also compromise. ACPS should reiterate its jurisdiction over field at Hammond. If necessary, they should prioritize field usage to school-age children, and in the spirit of compromise end activities by 9:00pm, instead of the requested 10:00pm (OK, compromise at 9:30pm). That leaves no doubt that this facility is for the benefit of the children of Alexandria. This allows for year-around scheduling for youth related activities during the Winter months (when it is dark at 5:00pm- and the summer months when it is dark a approximately 9:00pm.) Having no artificial lighting whatsoever severely limits evening usage, youth coaching availability, and scheduling of this or any athletic field.

The “procedural defects” noted in the appeal aside, these concessions are reasonable and rational. It will resolve the issue as to whether there is a core obstructionism to opponents of lights. Will they use every legal nuance to prevent lighting, or are they willing to come to a conciliatory compromise. The claimed “arrogance” of city's officials also should be tempered by the real and present need. The children of Alexandria are the real losers in this confrontation, as we continue to have one of the highest childhood obesity rate in the region. The “direct and material harm” referenced in the appeal is to the health of thousands of our children, for the relatively minor inconvenience of a few.

Author's note:

For a full examination of the FIO requested document visit

<http://www.seminaryhillassn.org/hotissues/hammondlights/index.html>

For relevant recent news articles search for "Hammond field" at the Alexandria Times or Alexandria Gazette