

**East and West Fairmount Park  
Community Vision  
Moderator Report**

**Date of Forum: September 25, 2013**

**Location of Forum: John Anderson Cultural Center**

**Moderator name(s): Shakira Abdul-Ali, Ted Enoch**

**Group Description**

The group started out with six participants – 2 white females, 3 African-American females, 1 African-American male. Others came in as the discussion moved forward, until we concluded with 11 participants: 4 African-American females; 4 African-American males; 3 white females.

**Ice-Breaker**

Some of the stated reasons these local community members gave for attending the meeting tonight were:

- I walk the trails from the Museum back to this area, and you can see a progression in the maintenance of the Park, from well-kept to poorly-kept. Poor lighting, etc. I want to share ideas about how we can improve the Park's appearance in this area.
- I used the Park a lot as a young person. I love watching the fireworks, and recently I noticed a hostel! What's that about?
- I went to St. Joe's Prep, and I grew up around the Zoo. I represent many people and groups tonight, including Wynnefield Residents Association, Wynnefield Business Association, and the Belmont Plateau, an important icon here. I'm concerned that the Park is becoming an embarrassment. There is little to no refreshment for visitors, and when you get refreshment, there is nowhere to dispose of the waste. There are no bathrooms. I don't hang around in the parking lot due to drug paraphernalia.
- I've used the Park for over 50 years. I want to hear about the vision for the Park, and to offer my input.
- I left the area, and recently returned – because of the Park. I am interested in seeing how there can be an improvement in the access to the Park.
- I'm representing Councilman Jones AND I'm here as someone who rode horses in the Centennial District. I have participated in track tournaments; I have run for Overbrook. I've run cross country. We have an interest in making the Park an Outdoor Classroom for the environment. Five schools in the 4<sup>th</sup> Council District are looking for outdoor experiences for their students. The Centennial District offers this possibility.

**Part 1: Use in the park**

How people used the Park in the past, and how they use it now.

- Running or jogging on MLK/West River Drive
- Watching the July 4th fireworks from Belmont Plateau (Did you know that a giant VIP tent at the Mann Center now obstructs a lot of the view that I used to love?)
- Cookouts and picnics on the plateau and other locations
- Kelly Pool – swimming

- Basketball on the courts at Parkside. (Did you know that people often use the courts to illegally dump trash and construction debris?)
- Walking, all over the park, but notably near the Mann Music Center, and on Ford Road (I like to walk with three friends of mine...)
- Visiting Old Memorial Hall and enjoying the “magical” acoustic echo effects at the “Whispering Wall.” I love blowing people’s minds there. (Many in the group agreed!)
- Hiking all through the park, all the way to Manayunk, Valley Green or to Strawberry Mansion.
- My parents are docents at some of the park mansions.
- The Mann Music Center
- Sledding
- Trail walking, you can take a trail from out here all the way to 33rd street
- Camp Brotherhood – my family used to drive me around the park, and I thought I was travelling to foreign lands. Little did I know that I was still in my backyard, but my family just drove all over this beautiful, huge park.
- There are important educational components happening in the park. There are five schools in the West Park area that use the park and lake for an urban/rural classroom environment, where they study plant and animal life, and urban gardening
- People walk their dogs in the park
- There are dangerous wild dogs in the park.
- Dancing and music events
- Picnics like at Lemon Hill (Did you know their driveway is so full of potholes that in some places you can barely drive through it?)
- Youth conservation groups used to exist in the past that some in attendance were members of
- Volunteer work, like cleaning the park, just like Ready Willing and Able do today. They do a great job!
- Sports: Cricket, Football, Softball, Cross Country running (said a participant with many memories of painful runs on the plateau), Rugby, Ultimate Frisbee, Disc Golf, Tennis
- Please Touch Museum

How people would like to use the park and what gets in the way of that today:

- Love to use “Art Museum Phlash” types of buses to travel into the park
- There could be much greater access to, or even a tour of the W. Park, Centennial Lake. In the past there have been tours to historic African American locations in the park, like the site of the Negro Baseball League field, and the memorial statue dedicated to African American Civil War veterans, and other locations...
- Mansions could be used/adopted by more groups to help preserve and protect them. These mansions are great assets and they need to be better recognized and managed. There is a good example of this at the Woodford Mansion where volunteers conduct beekeeping and maintain an orchard.
- Sports should continue, but there needs much great support of the infrastructure and people who support the sports. There is only one port-o-potty at the plateau, and it is

often in dismal condition. There could be operational locker rooms and bathrooms. And simple concessions when sports are happening.

- We can promote fishing, perhaps with a fishing pier at Concourse Lake or Centennial Lake
- Would love to see more Movies in the Park

#### Barriers:

- Traffic. You can't cross the Avenue of the Republic at certain spots – as this moderator discovered tonight when he biked to this community forum :(
- The traffic from Mann Music Center events can be disruptive and dangerous for bikers and walkers. The park needs to be far more pedestrian friendly.
- Overgrowth and dead trees can block paths, or completely overgrow paths, and can cause safety hazards
- Personal safety, security needs to be improved
- Parking can be confusing, and in the large lots, like at The Dell, there is no lighting, or parking signs/zones to help you identify where you parked in the lot (like at major venue parking centers)
- Again, access is a problem for people, City Avenue, Montgomery Avenue, Belmont Avenue, these roads are very hard to cross safely for walkers and bikers
- Is West Fairmont Park underutilized? Or underdeveloped? Can we increase programming for youth and families?
- Families and youth need access to refreshments
- More civic partnership and friends groups are needed to steward the park, like the Garden Club of America during their 100 year celebration, they adopted Centennial Lake, cleaned it, dredged it and really helped its condition.
- We need better highlighting and promotion of the activities that are happening in our park
- People don't have an idea of what's happening in the park. We need better information and communication about park activities. Like with the summer camps. There are free summer camps for area youth that are (purposefully?) under publicized.
- The Centennial Cafe. Does anyone know about it? And even if you did, the traffic is terrible there and makes it difficult for walkers and bikers to get there.
- Definitely need better signage for landmarks and activities, maybe with QR codes, or audio/phone components
- We need to bring the history forward for park visitors (see above point)
- Accessibility issues. We need more ramps and railings.
- Bathrooms are in disrepair
- Trails and fields are overgrown. Could there be volunteer groups, like there used to be, the Young Park Rangers, who help maintain and clean parts of the park?

#### **Part 2: Discussion of draft guidelines**

During the second portion of our group conversation, we examined the draft guidelines for East and West Fairmont Park. Most felt that the guidelines more-or-less supported the current and

future uses they wished to see in the park that had been discussed earlier. When asked what they specifically liked about the guidelines, the following points were made:

- They're a good start
- Protecting wildlife is good.
- Enjoyment of water is encouraged, like supporting activities on the water – e.g. fishing
- Water-based education exploration – that's good
- I like #4 – helping people to get a better understanding of the Park is good. Signage that relates to people's experiences in the Park would be helpful.
- There was dance that was conducted on the Bridge! That was really nice.
- Making people more aware of what's going on is helpful. Using flyers to let people know what is on the schedule; right now there isn't really any way to know, until the day the event is happening.
- #6 – Safety and accessibility goals are helpful and important
- Transportation through the Park should be emphasized for bikes and walkers / runners, and made easier, enabling people to leave their cars at home.

When asked what they would change about the guidelines, the following points were raised:

- Trash removal! Weeds and bushes are badly overgrown.
- On West River Drive – plant life is overgrown.
- Graffiti on West River Drive – it seems that a lot of money is spent where wealthier people live to keep the Park well maintained and looking good. Not so much where working families live.
- There is no evidence that green technology is being used. Wind, solar and/or water power could be used.
- How do we bring the structures into a design that invites three generations of families into the Park so that all can enjoy it? Children, young- to middle-aged adults, and seniors, alike.
- Safety and security – these factors should be highlighted.
- Strengthen the connection between trails inside the Park.
- In some places – sidewalks become dead-ends; this should be addressed – clearing away debris to extend the trail, or alert that the trail is a dead-end.
- Guideline #2 – regarding “protect and enhance,” should include an emphasis on maintenance practices
- Guidelines #3 and #4 – regarding ‘stewardship.’ We should talk about how the public can take care of the Park – e.g. a Park Clean-Up Day.
- Each section of the Park can have a “Friends” Group to take care of that section of the Park.
- Fundraising & Clean-up programming would leverage current resources connected to business, philanthropy, government and civic collaboration for maintenance
- There should be greater accessibility for people using walkers and motorized chairs
- There is no public transportation through the Park – connecting different venues to each other for, e.g., tourists and other users. This requires people to have to drive their cars through the Park.

- We should encourage youth employment and volunteer opportunities in the operation of the Park. These opportunities should be connected to zones or neighborhoods around the Park.

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**Date of Forum: September 25, 2013**

**Location of Forum: John Anderson Cultural Center**

**Moderator name(s):** Jeff Branch, Terrill Thompson

**Group Description**

There were nine participants in the group: three African-American women, three white men, one African-American man, and a six-year old. Three of the participants lived in or close to the park and three participants were connected with organizations that utilize the park. Participants came to the meeting for a variety of reasons, including wanting to see the park return to its glory, wanting to increase resources to the park, to preserve the park as a place for children to connect with nature, and out of concern for maintenance and cleanliness.

**Ice-Breaker**

The universal reasons these local community members gave for attending the meeting tonight:

- Want to see the park come back to its glory

**Part 1: Use in the park**

How people used the Park in the past, and how they use it now.

- Walking, biking and hiking using both River Drives
- Exploring and testing the different Trails
- Drive through as a connector for West and North Philly; drive through as alternative to highway
- Recycling Center for compost
- St. Joseph Prep uses the park fields for all outdoor teams
- Rock collections: Lincoln Drive, Wissahickon Walkway
- Valley Green
- Azalea Gardens (Kelly Drive)
- Walkathons and Runs for both civic and corporate sponsored events and causes (i.e. cancer research)
- Wynnefield Heights: Easter Egg Hunts, Movie in the Park, Community Day in the park, Picnics and Birthdays

How people would like to use the park:

- Swimming through the creation of another 'Crystal Lake' (i.e. swimming place from past history)
- More tennis courts – Chamounix tennis courts often feel like a 'private club'; there are other tennis courts but they are poorly maintained
  - Revitalize the tennis courts for us; (nets; maintaining the courts to make them appealing for use)
  - As an example Chamounix Drive courts are used for camps and are well maintained...although, there is the feeling that 'pros' use Chamounix

- Boy Scouts build a camp that could be used for a variety of purposes...

Barriers:

- **Safety** – concern about the water with respect to drowning occurrences
- **Safety** – don't feel safe walking by myself; wants a partner – with the exception of the River Drives (all except one person), but depends on the time of the day
  - (ie. Dead bodies have been found in the park; Fairmount Park Rapist never been caught)
- **Safety** – would not go into the woods...not sure of wildlife
  - Wild dogs that travel into the community; foxes; deer (lyme disease or deer crossing roads)
- **Safety** – Weeds are too high in sections – promotes feeling of being unsafe (predators; wildlife)
  - On the positive – some concurred that they noticed cutting of bushes
- **Safety** – Trails not clearly marked; need signage and/or indication where the trails lead
  - If we make enhancements, expect that there would a positive change and willingness to experience the trails
- **Safety** – Saint Joseph Prep's (SJP) coaches indicated that even the police won't go to the upper lot of Belmont Plateau because of illegal activity
  - Coaches at SJP no longer allow the football team to tackle on the fields because of used condoms and needles that are clearly visible
  - Took football team off Belmont Plateau for practice because cars were burglarized...moved to using Temple University as a practice site
- **Safety** - Lack of police presence
  - 19<sup>th</sup> District is slow to respond. Participants voiced their opinions that the 19<sup>th</sup> district is stretched all over West Philly and does not view the park as a priority
  - Need substations in the park and callboxes
  - No longer have Mounted Fairmount Guards or at least not visible - need more mounted police to patrol the park
    - Is the stable on MLK Drive still used...?
    - What about bike patrols...?
    - Can meter maids be deployed differently...?
- Other cities (ex: Jamaica Queens experienced challenges similar to Philadelphia. People started using Central Park because it was well maintained – good memories from when one participant lived there...)
- **Access** – if we were lost, or something else, how would we be found because of lack of markings?
  - No major entrance points; no real aligned paths; no trail markers
  - Can we engage Boy Scouts to help with this process...?
- **Access** – 52<sup>nd</sup> street gets nothing
  - We need expansion of streets – wideside box; bicycle access
- **Access** – Need neighborhood to blend to/with park trails
- **Access** – Montgomery Drive @ Belmont Avenue (a major access point to the park) – big problem navigating the lights because not a walker or biker pathway access

- **Access** – Horticultural Center Entrance – impossible to get out of the Center because there is no traffic control
- **Access** – Policy of closing the Drives is a **Paradox**. People get to enjoy the activities that live outside the city, but closing the Drives leaves a ‘bad taste in the mouths’ of the adjoining neighborhoods...and, probably people coming into the city
  - A traffic nightmare – the River Drives are major roads to get out of and into neighborhoods
  - What gives anyone the right to close the Drive for a Regatta
    - Parking is an intrusion
  - April through October closure of the West River Drive causes a challenge...even though the intent is to promote usage
  - The heavy use of Belmont Plateau creates ad hoc parking lots that cause traffic log jams and extreme congestion on Belmont Avenue, entry to the drives and highways
- **Access Ideas** – Ideas emerged from the group to enhance access
  - Enhance public transportation access...currently we have Route 38 Bus which is a long drive
  - Think about creating specialty routes
    - Strawberry Mansion Bridge – Is it a possibility to create an access connection by creating a LOOP bus or trolley to Center City? Like there was in the 1950’s... (What is the weight capacity of the Strawberry Mansion Bridge – a consideration)
    - Would be helpful...something like the Art Museum Trolley. Create an intentional connector from the park to the zoo
    - PHLASH BUS – with mappings to encourage exploration
    - Something that connects major sites in the Park (Valley Green; Belmont Plateau; Dell; Mann, Horticultural Center; Smith Playground)
    - MAY BE ENCOURAGING FOR MORE SCHOOL GROUPS (IE Bushkill Falls)
    - Create a focus on neighborhoods and major sites...intentionally show the connections
      - Would be advantageous for neighborhoods and tourists
    - Research the ‘developing train’ idea that was talked about years ago
- **Access Technology** – Use technology to identify key sites and access points; use technology to develop codes that would identify trails and paths
  - Use Facebook and Twitter as another point of leverage to educate people

## Part 2: Discussion of draft guidelines

The group didn’t engage deeply with the guidelines. Questions such as “in what ways would these guidelines support or hinder the ideas you have for the park” received uncertain responses. The group did have productive conversation and expressed the following desires:

- Guideline 1: Start by improving how people enter and access the entire park.
  - More about bike access
- Include something for a wide age range
- Provide a place for dirt bikes and quads that is off of the streets
- Become accessible for people with physical disabilities



- The new bike rentals on Kelley Dr. are taking off; there should also be boat rentals if there aren't already
- Add bike and walking trails on the old trolley tracks (utilize what is already there)
- Guideline 3: Allow people to better enjoy the water.
  - Like this guideline, especially the end of it about education. Education will help prevent people from dumping into the water system.
- Explore partnership with other organizations to build new fields
  - Would need to become easier to partnership with. Right now it is difficult due to slow/lack of response and lots of red tape.
- Include surrounding schools among the stakeholder groups
- Look to other parks for ideas
- Tie to healthy youth/ decreasing obesity
- Have easy ways to find out about activities in the park so that we can participate
  - Have a Facebook page/ use social media
- Have a walk/run to raise awareness of the park
- Have good, easy to access maps
  - Both printed and online
  - Set the maps up to work with GPS
- Educate people regarding how to get information about the park that is already available
- Have more and nicer BBQ sites
- Make is easy to contact parks and rec. with questions
- Create a system for dealing with trans from BBQs and events

#### Possible Activities for Youth

- Soccer
- Skateboarding
- Free concerts and movies
- Roller skating area
- HUGE spray park (it would help limit fire hydrant usage)
- Park needs to be accessible from neighborhoods

#### **Common Ground**

Participants were particularly concerned about safety, cleanliness and access. There was interest among the group in having the Park look to partnerships and other creative way to increase resources.

#### **Minority Report**

None. The group members had different priorities, but there was not disagreement.