



ARLINGTON COUNTY
SPORTS
COMMISSION
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 414
Arlington, Virginia 22201



June 7, 2017

The Honorable Jay Fisetto
Chair, Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Position on Lighting Williamsburg Fields

Dear Chairman Fisetto,

The Sports Commission values the opportunity to provide input to the County Board on important issues that affect Arlington's sports community. Our charter authorizes us to make recommendations as we see fit on, among other things, the adequacy of Arlington's sports facilities. For the better part of the last decade, one of the most consistent themes before this Commission has been tension between the growing demand for sports facility capacity and the County's extremely limited options for meeting this demand. In an urban jurisdiction such as ours, public land and facilities are mostly fixed, but our population continues to grow, meaning our public spaces have to serve more and more people every year. Not only do we see a pressing need for additional field space, we also see unyielding pressure to surrender existing fields to other uses, such as schools, dog parks, or open spaces. Because this tension shows no signs of abating, our Commission strongly supports any and all means to make better use of existing facilities.

Lights are one way to make better use of fields because, quite simply, lit fields offer more playable hours than unlit fields. The greater the availability of playable hours, the more the County maximizes taxpayer investments in its athletic facilities. Thus, we strongly support lighting the Williamsburg Middle School athletic fields and encourage the Board to approve installation of lights at this location. In making this recommendation however, we are not dismissive of some neighbors' strong concerns about adding lights, and would like to offer some constructive comments and suggestions.

First, based on our 18 months of participation in the Williamsburg Field Site Evaluation Workgroup (WFWG), **we believe that neighbors' questions and concerns have been taken seriously and that the County has shown due diligence by exploring a range of mitigation steps.** Indeed, owing to neighbors' input and requests, additional data has several times been collected, the task force schedule was extended, and the initial design has been modified and improved in a number of ways.

The County put forth this effort despite the fact that resistance to lights at Williamsburg is not complete and universal amongst neighbors of the school. There are families, including some who live directly across the street from the fields, who favor the installation of lights at this location. There are also residents who are ambivalent regarding this topic. A very vocal and organized group of neighbors has maintained steadfast resistance to lighting the fields, but there is not consensus of opinion in the neighborhood.

Second, we believe that additional protections should be put in place to promote accountability and ensure that mitigation steps are working as planned. **We advise that the County enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the neighbors** similar to the one used during lights installation work at Greenbrier Park. That MOU provided a clear written record of the plan and the mitigation steps and contributed to a transparent and civil process. We believe that such an approach at Williamsburg, perhaps coupled with the **establishment of a Friends of Williamsburg Fields group** that would be empowered to conduct oversight and foster communication between neighbors and the County, would lead to a similar positive outcome.

Third, given the continually rising demand, it is clear that similar field lighting decisions will inevitably occur at other locations, and immediate neighbors will almost always be the most vocal opposition group. **The County should have clear and transparent criteria to help guide these decisions moving forward, and those criteria must balance all viewpoints.** While the WFWG developed some criteria, we believe that further deliberation is warranted. As you know, the Planning Our Public Spaces (POPS) process is currently working on its own lighting criteria. We think the Board would be well-served to learn more about the POPS criteria as it makes its decision on lighting Williamsburg fields.

Ultimately, the decision about lighting the Williamsburg fields involves trade-offs between community needs and neighborhood interests. In October 2016, this Commission adopted a Position Statement about planning processes to reinforce the notion that the entire Arlington community has primary “ownership” of public facilities. While specific measures may be needed to satisfy those immediately impacted by any changes, it is important not to lose sight of community needs. **The strong concerns of a small number of affected residents cannot outweigh the overall good that lighting the Williamsburg fields would bring to thousands of Arlington County citizens.**

Sincerely,



Heather Cocozza
Chair

Cc: Katie Cristol
Christian Dorsey
Libby Garvey
John Vihstadt
Mark Schwartz, County Manager
Jane Rudolph, Director of Department of Parks & Recreation