

Testimony for May 17, 2012, Public Hearing of the Planning Commission
Application 2232-V11-25 (Interim Off-Leash Dog Park Area at Westgrove Park)

Betsy Martin, Mount Vernon Council of Citizens' Associations

My name is Betsy Martin, and I am representing the Mount Vernon Council of Citizens' Associations, a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization representing citizens' and homeowners associations of the Mount Vernon magisterial district since 1969.

Over a year ago, the Pumphouse Association for Canine Kindness approached the MVCCA Environment and Recreation Committee, which I chair, and asked for our support in getting Westgrove Park designated for interim use as an off-leash dog area.

Our committee gathered facts and information, visited the site, debated the question, and formulated a resolution in support of the interim use which was passed by the General Council of the MVCCA on March 23, 2011 (www.mvcca.org/Resolutions/res-E&R-2011-001-Westgrove.pdf).

Some of the pertinent facts about Westgrove Park as we set them out in our resolution are as follows:

- The former Westgrove Sewage Treatment Plant was reduced to a pumping station (still active) and the 22-acre property was transferred to the Fairfax County Park Authority in 2001 and is now known as Westgrove Park;
- The park includes a stream, buffered by a designated Resource Protection Area (RPA), that drains to the Potomac River through Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve, a unique

ecosystem and the largest temperate freshwater tidal marsh in the National Park Service system;

- Development of a master plan for Westgrove Park was initiated in 2005 but was suspended indefinitely due to lack of community consensus on future uses;
- Dog owners have been using Westgrove Park as a *de facto* off-leash dog area for about five years, but in 2010 animal control officers began enforcing the leash law and ticketing owners of unleashed dogs;
- The Pumphouse Association for Canine Kindness (PACK) asked the Park Authority to designate a portion of Westgrove Park for interim use as an off leash dog area, with no additional improvements, until such time as the county obtains citizen approval and identifies funds for alternative use(s);
- The only off-leash dog park in Mount Vernon district is at Grist Mill Park, located 11 miles away on heavily-travelled roads, and the closest dog park is Founders Park, located 3.5 miles away in the City of Alexandria;
- Section 41.1-2-4 of the Fairfax Code permits an “off-leash or dog exercise area” to be designated on Park Authority land by resolution of the Park Authority, and policy 103-1-3 of the Park Authority policy manual allows the authorization of this use on an interim basis;
- PACK has demonstrated the need and desire for an off leash dog area in this area including with a petition with over 500 supporters, a need that was also rated as one of the greatest unmet needs by the Park Authority itself in an assessment conducted in 2004 using standard metrics;

In light of these considerations, the MVCCA voted to recommend that the Park Authority grant interim use of a portion of Westgrove Park as an off leash dog area, subject to five conditions:

1. The Park Authority shall present a specific proposal for consideration and seek the views of neighborhood groups, the Belle View Elementary School, and Martha Washington Library;
2. There shall be a designated “dog owners’ sponsoring organization” with responsibility for monitoring the use of the interim dog area in accordance with Park Authority guidance;
3. The interim off leash dog area shall be located within the already-disturbed area of mowed grass enclosed by an oval asphalt driveway (that is, the site of the former sewage treatment plant);
4. The specific design of the off leash dog area is to be negotiated by Park Authority staff and the dog owners’ sponsoring organization;
5. Leash restrictions will be enforced outside of the designated off leash dog area and the RPA and natural areas should be demarcated as no-dog areas.

The proposal that is the subject of today’s hearing would create a two acre fenced, off-leash dog area within the oval driveway that is the site of the former sewage treatment plant. PACK has agreed to serve as the sponsoring group. The area to be fenced is entirely outside of the RPA, as shown in the report, and leash restrictions would be enforced outside of the fenced area. The Park Authority says that it “intends to mitigate dog waste by requiring dog owners to clean up after their dogs and using the available trash receptacles, which will be regularly emptied by park maintenance,” (p. 8). In its resolution MVCCA asked that the RPA and natural areas be

demarcated as no-dog areas, but this proposal appears to allow them in these areas if they are leashed. However, the report states that, “Based on staff review, impacts from the proposed interim use are not expected to extend to the adjacent stream and Dyke Marsh Preserve areas east of Westgrove Park” (p.10). It further states, “Direct adverse impacts to birds and wildlife are not expected from the off-leash area which is a cleared open space. The illegal off-leash use of areas within Westgrove Park, especially the RPA, is potentially detrimental to wildlife. The controlled off-leash area will discourage the presence of dogs within the RPA” (p.7). Finally, according to the staff report, “the interim off-leash dog area does not preclude any future actions to reinforce connections to natural areas outside of Westgrove Park” (p.10).

With the exception of the condition that the RPA and natural areas be demarcated as no-dog areas, the proposed interim plan appears to conform closely to the conditions that MVCCA set out in its resolution over a year ago. Therefore on behalf of MVCCA I urge the Planning Commission to grant the request for interim use as described in the Park Authority’s application. As the facility is planned, we hope that it will be designed in a way that discourages the presence of dogs in the RPA and sensitive natural areas of the park.

We also hope that the Planning Commission encourages the Park Authority to initiate the public master planning of Westgrove Park as soon as possible, and to conduct a formal inventory of the natural resources of Westgrove Park in order to inform final decisions about appropriate and compatible use(s) for a final park plan. These are the final two requests of the MVCCA resolution.