

## Stating Cases in Point

### Public forum on Blockhouse Point draws criticism from recreation groups

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Parking spaces are rarely full at Blockhouse Point Conservation Park, said Rob Gibbs of Park and Planning

But Gibbs expects the 30 spaces by the park will soon be filled to capacity. Interest in the park is on the rise, he said, and a range of outdoor enthusiasts want to have their say as the county determines future use of Blockhouse Point.

“People are roaming around trying to carve up a niche,” said Ron LaCoss, a Landon School teacher and educational chair of the Sierra Club. “Leave something for wildlife, minimize our intrusion, and give a little.”

Given an opportunity to weigh in on the park's master plan, though, a clamor of voices have something to say, with input coming from natural preservationists to historians to hikers to equestrians to mountain bikers to highway construction advocates.

It's nothing new, said Gibbs, project manager for the Blockhouse Point master plan. “We've talked to pretty much all the folks before,” Gibbs said. “Our job is to take the concerns from all the different constituents [and] reach the right balance.”

Gibbs coordinated a forum which drew about 40 interested residents last Thursday, Sept. 18, at Rockwood Manor in Potomac.

BLOCKHOUSE POINT was first acquired by Montgomery County in 1967. Several in attendance felt that the county was attempting to keep the park low-profile and inaccessible, in part through limited parking spaces by the park.

“This is one of a few conservation parks. I don't think we're being mean,” said Gibbs. “We're taking the middle road.”

That means determining an appropriate level of access for a park that preserves natural and historical resources in one of the county's largest contiguous areas of upland forest. The park is home to rare species such as river otters and skinks, as well as nine endangered, threatened, or watchlist plant species.

“We need to keep space in this county for species other than us,” said Ginny Barnes, of the West Montgomery County Citizens Association. “To me, conservation parks are the county's equivalent of wilderness areas. We're lucky to have these lands, and this is one of the best of the best.”

“You can probably tell that it is very high-quality forest area,” said Carole Bergmann, a forest ecologist on the staff natural resources division. “It is the only park in MNCCP that has this kind of a rock vista.”

In addition to natural preservation, historic preservation is also an issue. Blockhouse Point contains the only undisturbed Civil War campsite in the Washington area, according to the plan draft. The park's name comes from three blockhouses built by the 19th Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War, and earthen remains of one of the blockhouses can still be found in the park.

“It's one of my three favorite archaeological sites in the county,” said Jim Sorensen, a historic preservation specialist on the master plan staff. “I think it has the potential to add to our knowledge about the Civil War. I don't know any other [Civil War] campsite that's so well preserved in the Washington area.”

MOST OF BLOCKHOUSE point's 7.2 miles of trails are proposed for hiker-only access in the master plan. Equestrians have ridden through the park for decades, according to the master plan, which also acknowledges mountain biking trips in the park, although it is prohibited.

“The [trails] have been there for some time, and people have decided for themselves. They have dictated their use, because they were there first,” said LaCoss.

The county's acquisition of the adjacent Callithea Horse Farm as parkland influences the master plan for a park featuring several equestrian trails. Equestrians currently access the park from Callithea's boarding facility, and ride to the C&O Canal towpath on trails in the park. The master plan recommends formalizing a

5.5-mile loop from Callithea to Violette's Lock, down the canal through Pennyfield Lock, then back to Callithea through a less sensitive area of Blockhouse Point.

At presentation of the master plan staff draft on Sept. 18, some attendees questioned why further equestrian access wasn't recommended. The one existing bridge is almost impassable, they said, and fallen trees make other areas difficult to ride through. The bridge is the only maintained structure in the park besides the two parking lots. Equestrians asked that one more loop of hiker/equestrian trails be added to the master plan.

"I would put another [equestrian] trail," said Chuck Fenimore of Gaithersburg, a frequent hiker at Blockhouse Point. "There are some existing trails that take you up to the north end of the park. They're eliminated and not provided an alternative."

"We like to have loops," said Tim McGrath, Montgomery County coordinator for Trail Riders of Today (TROT). "Who wants to ride one direction, and backtrack every step you make?"

A cultural learning visitor center at Callithea is proposed in the master plan draft, as well as a trail-marking system to clarify permitted use of the trails.

LOCATION OF a proposed shared-use trail along Muddy Branch Stream will be revisited, said Gibbs. At issue is whether the trail should be located in an already degraded area, where invasive species have already established themselves, rather than the location in the current plan, where few invasive species exist.

"People ask why are we going through the woods [when] clear areas get more invasive species," said Bergmann.

Others questioned whether a preservation park should have any shared-use trails at all.

"I'm concerned about the shared-use trail that runs along Muddy Branch and brings bikes into the conservation land," said Barnes. "I know bikes are not going to stay on that one trail."

"Overall, the fewer trails, the better," agreed Scott Bender of Potomac, also a member of the West Montgomery County Citizens Association. "Can't there be one place where we don't encroach upon it?"

BUT VISITORS are likely to increase at Blockhouse Point, as the master plan staff estimates, due to completion of the Muddy Branch Stream Valley Park Trail between Gaithersburg and the C&O Canal.

Park and Planning expects more hikers and walkers in the park in upcoming years, and the master plan draft suggests two areas for additional parking if they should become necessary — one at Callithea Farm and one on Esworthy Road.

Potomac resident Jerry Garson raised the issue of constructing a new bridge crossing over the Potomac River. The county should set aside land for a crossing, Garson said.

"I don't want to destroy Blockhouse Point. ... From what we heard today, it's probably a terrible place [for a bridge]," Garson said. "You tell us the location that would cause the least amount of damage. ... It would probably take less land, as a footprint, than this building [Rockwood Manor]."

Gibbs and other planning staff did not believe the subject of a bridge crossing bore relevance to the meeting. A bridge crossing would also require a four-to-six lane divided highway.

A PUBLIC HEARING draft, based on public input at last week's meeting, should be available next month. "We'll make adjustments to the plan based on comments," said Gibbs, who hopes to have the master plan submitted to County Council for approval next summer.