

Friday, Dec. 3, 2010

Josiah Henson museum plans approved, funds not

Parks officials to move slowly with upgrades

by Alex Ruoff | Staff Writer

While they gave it a new name Thursday, the Montgomery County Planning Board members say they are not ready to give Josiah Henson Special Park in Bethesda the kind of funding park stewards have requested to make it a living museum.

Park officials received unanimous approval from the board for their master plan and proposed name change — from Uncle Tom's Cabin Special Park — at the board's Thursday meeting, where commissioners applauded the suggestion for upgrades but warned that money to support it won't be easy to find.

Joe Alfandre, a planning board member and commissioner, said the park's stewardship division's recommendations for a \$3 million to \$5 million renovation of the park that includes major landscaping and construction efforts as well as hiring a full-time museum manager wouldn't be feasible.

This option would keep the park open on weekends between February and November, starting as early as 2016, and would cost about \$185,500 outside of capital costs. Currently, parks staff give four scheduled tours of the grounds per year which, coupled with maintenance, costs them \$14,029 a year.

"We need to try to be practical in this extremely tight fiscal situation," he said.

While the plan was approved and parks staff will begin designing the new park, stewardship administrators will have to go back to the board for future funding, said Montgomery Parks Director Mary Bradford.

The master plan also calls for the installation of public restrooms, more parking, permanent exhibits and a variety of other changes designed to turn the 1.52-acre park into a museum concerning slave life in Montgomery County.

The site was once home to the Isaac Riley plantation, where the Rev. Josiah Henson is believed to have been enslaved as a child, said Shirl Spicer, a museum manager for the department of parks. The 1.02-acre historic portion of the park was purchased in January 2006 for \$1.75 million.

Spicer said she and parks staff plan to open the park for tours every weekend in February in celebration of Black History Month.