

# REPORT TO THE ST. VINCENT DE PAUL PARISH COUNCIL

## Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park

### Process

The Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park met five times, with an initial meeting on October 15<sup>th</sup>. Our goal established by the President of the Parish Council was to consider the current operations of the park, discuss concerns about the present state of the park, examine alternatives for the future of the park, and make recommendations to the Parish Council, based on our findings, on a strategy for dealing with the park.

In the course of our work we examined input provided by parishioners during recent work on the strategic plan of the parish and interviewed experts knowledgeable about the park and the larger issues of homelessness in Baltimore and the impact that homeless individuals are having on the “Fallsway Homeless Corridor.” We spoke at some length with:

- Lawrence ‘C’ Henderson (currently living in the park)
- Katie League, Outreach Service Coordinator, Health Care for the Homeless
- Gabby Knighton, Outreach Coordinator in the Mayor’s Office of Homeless Services
- Sara Hoffman, Outreach Supervisor for Bon Secours Hospital, one of four outreach organizations funded by Hands in Partnership (HIP), a program funded through a grant to Health Care Access MD and Behavioral Systems. The park is within the Bon Secours larger service region.
- Father Chuck Cantera, who is familiar with the people of the park.

The outreach workers expressed a positive view of the St. Vincent park, especially compared with other places where the homeless congregate. The park is centrally located near services offered on the Fallsway and to the east. The park has two constituencies, those who sleep in the park (10-12 in the winter and up to 25 in the warmer months) and those who come to socialize and receive food and donations.

A list of Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park members and a brief account of the homelessness challenges of our city is attached to this report.

### **We considered three options for addressing the perceived problem with the St. Vincent Park:**

- Closing the park to homeless individuals
- Improving the appearance and functioning of the park as it now operates
- Developing a structure on a portion of the park to provide permanent supportive housing to homeless individuals, within the restrictions of the Maryland Historic Trust’s existing Memorandum of Understanding.

Closing the park was discarded as a viable option as we reached consensus that we needed to continue to provide a place where homeless individuals who are unwilling or unable to access the shelter system or permanent housing can continue to use the park on a temporary or semi-permanent basis.

Based on input from Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park member expertise and experience, and informed by the experts we consulted as part of our investigation we developed a list of the advantages and disadvantages of maintaining the park as a temporary sanctuary for homeless individuals and developing a multi-story structure to provide permanent supportive housing on the park site. Action items necessary to achieve each option are included.

## **OPTIONS AND FINDINGS**

### **Maintain the Park as a Temporary Sanctuary**

#### **Advantages of continued use of the park as a Temporary Sanctuary:**

1. The park is the best of bad options for many living in the Fallsway Homeless Corridor.
2. The park fulfills a vital theological and service mission of the parish that is part of the distinctive character and identification of the parish by many of its parishioners and outsiders.
3. Central location and the ability of park residents to connect with services, volunteers and housing opportunities.
4. Maintains the visibility of the homeless as a reminder to all who pass by that homelessness is an issue not to be ignored nor forgotten.
5. For many residents staying in the park provides a sense of family and connection to other residents, alumni and others who visit.
6. The park is safer than most alternatives due to its openness, clear sightlines along three streets and proximity to the Police Headquarters
7. It acts as a source of information for those living on the street.

#### **Disadvantages of continued use of the park as a Temporary Sanctuary**

1. There is a lack of real or sustained parish support for those residing in the park or for basic physical activities to sustain the character of the park.
2. There is a lack of proper facilities (bathrooms and showers) for the residents to live in dignity.
3. There is a lack of resources (both from Baltimore City and the parish) to adequately assist the residents in overcoming poverty and homelessness and thus the park cannot represent anything close to a “solution” to the challenge of homelessness in the city

#### **Action items to make this a viable option benefiting the residents as well as St Vincent de Paul**

- A. Create a Park Sanctuary Committee to coordinate the efforts of St Vincent’s parish, including the Park Workgroup and others working to address homelessness in the St. Vincent park
- B. Change the norm in the park on trash and excess belongings stored in the park and along our fence to prevent the park from becoming an encampment.
- C. Assign St. V’s Maintenance Superintendent to assist in park maintenance and for the Park Sanctuary Committee to engage the park residents and other sources of volunteers in our efforts to maintain the

cleanliness of the park on a daily basis.

- D. Educate the parish on the causes, and consequences of homelessness.
- E. Create a relationship and maintain the ties with the volunteer groups who distribute food and clothing in the park to see our point of view and maintain a sense of order and self-cleaning, i.e., don't drop off palletes of box lunches and expect that folks will clean up after themselves (particularly on Sunday mornings).
- F. Create a relationship with Baltimore Department of Public Works and volunteer groups to enforce the new cleanliness norms.
- G. Repair and provide regular maintenance of the physical environment (i.e. repair the benches and general grounds)
- H. Create formal linkages with park outreach workers (currently Bon Secours) and the City's outreach coordinator (Gabby Knighton) and the parish (through the **Sanctuary Committee**) to make sure we are coordinating our efforts, identifying problems and not working at cross purposes.
- I. Train a small number of volunteers in the parish to engage the park regulars in one-on-one relationships.
- J. Formulate procedures involving those who work in the rectory and those who volunteer or do outreach in the park that strengthens security benefiting residents and the parish
- K. Create and implement a staffing (volunteers and outreach workers) and a finance model to implement this strategy.
- L. Consider adding more lighting and/or security cameras to enhance security

### **Development of Permanent Supportive Housing on the Park Site**

#### **Advantages of Development of Permanent Supportive Housing**

- 1. The parish could provide 30 +/- units of housing with appropriate, professionally provided services for homeless individuals.
- 2. Exploring the development would allow the parish to connect with other churches that have developed housing for the homeless on their property or other land to learn from their successes and failures.
- 3. The park is located close to a wide array of services to assist the residents.
- 4. Create an attractive face for the Church onto Fayette and Front/Rt. 83.
- 5. Become part of the permanent solution to ending homelessness. We end homelessness by building housing.

#### **Disadvantages of Development of Permanent Supportive Housing**

- 1. There would be a loss a visibility of the homelessness problem that may lessen security of the park owing to its openness on three streets at a high profile corner.
- 2. There would be a loss of some sanctuary space open to all who need it.
- 3. It would take more than 4 years to develop and be open to residents.
- 4. A focus on developing a building could distract the parish's attention from the immediate problems occurring in the park.
- 5. We would effectively lose control of at least some portion of the park because of the requirement that we have a long term lease of the land with a developer/owner of a building.

**Action items to make this a viable option benefiting the residents as well as St Vincent**

- A. Negotiate with the Archdiocese, Maryland Historic Trust and CHAP to amend our historic easement to allow the development of a building on park land.
- B. Subdivide the park for long term lease.
- C. Secure the services of a developer to assume the financial risk of proceeding with the project and raise the construction funds.
- D. Secure the services of a service provider to work with the residents.
- E. Secure funds to pay to operate the building (i.e. Section 8) and provide services to the tenants (Medicare waiver).

The Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park agreed that the building needs to include space for services for those not living in the building such as bathrooms and showers open to all, and possibly office space for justice-focused non-profits. There was a strong agreement that the development of this building be considered only if a portion of the land is able to remain as a sanctuary.

**Recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park to the Parish Council:**

Considering the two options to address the issue of the St. Vincent Park confronting the parish and action steps necessary to improve the situation of the park as part of the mission of St. Vincent, Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park recommends that the Parish Council and Church pursue two concurrent strategies.

1. The first priority is to improve the park to become the most well-run temporary sanctuary possible. We recommend that the Park Workgroup, renamed the Sanctuary Committee be formed to coordinate the actions of the parish and other actors working in the park.
2. We recommend that a separate ad hoc committee be formed to explore the long term process of developing a building in the St. Vincent Park to provide permanent supportive housing and other services to those in the Fallsway corridor within the limitations of our historic MOU and our commitment to maintain a portion of the land as a temporary sanctuary.

**Ad Hoc Committee on the Status of the Park**

**Committee Charge:** To examine the conditions in the park and the adequacy of current management, and to explore options for the future of the park including the pros and cons of each.

**Roster**

**Joseph M. Cronyn**  
Parishioner, Member Social Action  
Committee  
President, Jonestown Planning Council  
Senior Managing Director  
Valbridge Property Advisors

**C. Matthew Hill**  
Parishioner, Parish Council Member-  
Liturgy  
Lawyer- Team Leader,  
Human Right to Housing Project  
Public Justice Center

**Sara Kelley**  
Parishioner, Past Parish Council  
Representative  
Past Park Working Group  
Coordinator of Park Volunteers

**Michael Kelly**  
Parishioner, Retired Lawyer  
Current Park Working Group  
Coordinator of Park Volunteers

**Fr. Dick Lawrence**  
Pastor

**Dan McCarthy**  
Parishioner  
Executive Director,  
Episcopal Housing Corporation

**Mary Ann O'Donnell**  
Occasionally worships with us  
Assistant Director and Chief Administrative  
Officer  
Catholic Charities of Baltimore

**Kieran Ruppert**  
Jesuit Volunteer Corps  
Staff, St. Vincent Parish

## **ADDENDUM ON HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS IN BALTIMORE**

The Park Workgroup's findings and recommendations were informed by the shape and depth of the affordable housing and homelessness crises in Baltimore and our collective calling to work toward greater social justice. The fundamental reality of these crises as they relate to our park is that far too many families and individuals have nowhere else to go. One recent report by Prof. Jeff Singer of the University of Maryland summarized the crisis as follows:

Baltimore's housing agency reports that 41,637 households (104,092 individuals) have worst case housing needs. This is related, of course, to the extraordinary level of poverty in Baltimore, where an astounding 25.1% of residents have incomes below the Federal poverty guidelines (\$11,490 for a single person; \$15,510 for two, \$19,530 for three, and \$23,550 for a household of four). 35.6% of Baltimore's children live in families with incomes below the Federal poverty guidelines. 34.5% of all City residents (214,235 in May 2013) participated in Federal food programs,<sup>1</sup>

This is a recipe for homelessness that our society has been unwilling to address. On January 25, 2011, 4,088 individuals (2,293 people were families with children) were identified as experiencing homeless in Baltimore City, a 52.5% increase since 2003. Of these 4,088 people, 1,795 individuals had no shelter whatsoever, i.e., they were literally living on the streets. This is not surprising since there are only 1,141 emergency shelter beds in Baltimore.<sup>2</sup> In 2008, Baltimore City emergency shelters turned away 16,007 individuals seeking shelter due to limited capacity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Singer, *Housing Our Neighbors : The National Housing Trust Fund and Affordable Housing*, 3-4 (Sept. 2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

This increase in homeless is caused in large part by the lack of affordable housing in the Baltimore region for people who are poor. Regionally, there is an “unmet need for affordable housing for about 70,000 households in the region.”<sup>4</sup> 51,000 of these households have incomes at or below 30% of Median Family Income (MFI)<sup>5</sup>, approximately \$26,000 for a family of four. Almost 30% of these 50,000 households have a disabled person needing greater accessibility such that 14,000 of these households at or below 30% of MFI require accessible units.<sup>6</sup> This is not a fringe population in the Baltimore region: More than 1/4 of renters in the region have incomes at or below 30% of MFI.<sup>7</sup>

Kevin Lindamood, Executive Director of Healthcare for the Homeless commented on the inhuman, lottery-like nature of subsidized housing when the City’s Section 8 program recently re-opened its doors for new applicants for the first time in over 8 years: “[N]early 74,000 low-income households in Baltimore enrolled through a Housing Authority website for the chance to secure one of 25,000 spots on a Section 8 waiting list. Those who make the cut have a roughly one in four chance of actually getting a subsidized housing voucher. A lottery. For poor people. For housing. Let that sink in.”

The causes of homeless and the lack of affordable housing on this massive scale are, like the causes of entrenched poverty, many and varied – not the least of which is the significant government disinvestment in affordable housing and mental health services. As people of faith we recognize that such suffering and inequality is, at its root, a symptom of a greater societal spiritual malaise that Pope Francis has identified: “We must recover the whole sense of gift, of gratuitousness, of solidarity. Rampant capitalism has taught the logic of profit at all costs, of giving to get, of exploitation without looking at the person... and we see the results in the crisis we are experiencing! This Home is a place that teaches charity, a “school” of charity, which instructs me to go encounter every person, not for profit, but for love.”<sup>8</sup>

The Park Workgroup believes that this analysis of homelessness and its root causes should inform the parish’s discernment of what steps the parish should take with respect to the future of the park.

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<sup>4</sup> Baltimore Metropolitan Council, “Stronger Communities, Greater Opportunity: The Baltimore Regional Housing Plan and Fair Housing Equity Assessment.” at 3 (Draft Sept. 5, 2014), *available at* <http://www.opportunitycollaborative.org/assets/Regional-Housing-Plan-Draft-5Sept2014.pdf?536869&536869>

<sup>5</sup> Median Family Income is a similar to the Area Median Income measure used elsewhere in this report.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 14.

<sup>8</sup> <http://globalfellows.crs.org/resources/selected-quotes-of-pope-francis/>