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June 18, 2021

Forest Hayes, Chairman
Loudoun County Planning Commission
PO Box 7000
Leesburg, VA 20177

To Chairman Hayes and Members of the Planning Commission:

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy (LWC) is submitting the following comments in regards to Bles Park Enhancements, application ZRTD-2019-004, SPEX-2019-0037, SPEX 2019-0038, SPEX 2019-0039. As currently proposed, there are a number of environmental and wildlife habitat impacts that remain unresolved. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy board and staff members raised these concerns at the April 2019 public information session, an October 2019 meeting with PRCS staff, and in a letter to Building & Development's Natural Resources Team in November 2020.

The revised Statement of Justification (10-30-2020) notes this application will:

- "provide opportunities for the natural enjoyment of the natural/environmental features by means of controlled and direct access"
- "allow for greater utilization by the greater public and will help fulfill the ever growing need for both passive and active recreational uses. This park will offer amenities that will appeal to a wide range of users."
- "be an enhancement of the existing facility"
- And, "the proposed use is in harmony with the Comprehensive Plan"

While we agree that these uses would provide more convenience to some members of the public, and appeal to a wider range of active recreation users, this application is not in harmony with the Comprehensive Plan, nor does it "harmoniously address the needs of users and impacts on the natural environment" as it claims. In fact, this application as proposed would destroy many of the natural assets and natural amenities, thus negating many of the human mental and physical health benefits it seeks to provide by connecting people with the natural environment. This application would unnecessarily degrade the existing facility, and it is not in compliance with the Comprehensive Plan and protections for River and Stream Corridor Resources.

This proposed application lacks in adequately addressing threatened and endangered species, protecting the exemplary natural communities or habitat (as defined in the 2019 Comprehensive Plan under Natural Heritage Resources), or preserving the existing tree canopy. The applicant has not yet studied for the presence of threatened or endangered species, and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is concerned about impacts to the exemplary natural communities and habitat currently present at the site. Notably, proposed new ball courts and lawn areas would negatively impact water quality, stormwater management, tree canopy, and wildlife habitat including pollinator habitat. Additionally, the proposed boardwalk around the wetlands would have a tremendous negative impact to the bird populations and exemplary wetland habitat currently found at the site.

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Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy recommends the Planning Commission require modifications to this application that would help the County fulfill strategies found in Chapter 3 of the 2019 Comprehensive Plan including, but not limited to, Strategies 1.1, 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 4.1, 4.2, 6.1, and 6.2.

The below proposed area “enhancements” reference the Bles Park Master Plan Illustrative (revised 4-9-21).

Area “F” Wetland Habitat Impacts:

- A boardwalk and new trail would increase recreation, and disturb habitat, in the most secluded portions of the wetlands. American Bittern have been seen in that area, possibly breeding in previous years (2018, 2019), but were only seen briefly in 2020 and 2021. In 2020, with increased recreation due to COVID-19, many people were spotted trespassing in this area, and likely disturbed and spooked the Bitterns from potentially breeding at the site. Numerous other sensitive bird species including Common Gallinule and Marsh Wren, and a River Otter have been recorded using the wetlands this year. Bles Park is often one of the only places in Loudoun County that many reclusive migrating bird species are observed. One alternative would be to substitute a platform(s) along the gravel road at the edge of the wetlands for viewing wildlife instead of the planned boardwalk, similar to the planned Observation Pavilion (#18) at the edge of the wetlands.

Area “11” Tennis and Pickleball Courts Impacts:

- Tennis and pickleball courts are inappropriate uses for this area. This area currently consists of Eastern Red Cedars signally early successional forest, and numerous native plants that have benefits to pollinators and other wildlife. Goldenrods, asters, Blue Mistflower, and New York Ironweed bloom in the fall. The mistflower and ironweed species are indicative of wet soils. Adding impervious surfaces in the floodplain, especially in an area that is wet enough to sustain these flora species, is not an appropriate use. An alternative would be to construct these courts at another existing park that is not located in a floodplain and does not currently have exemplary wildlife habitat.

Area “12” Unprogrammed Open Lawn Impacts:

- The unprogrammed open lawn area is an inappropriate use for this area. While we appreciate that the applicant has agreed to landscape with 80% native Virginia plants and 100% native grasses, we suggest that 100% of species used be native to Virginia. The proposed turf lawn would basically create more impervious surfaces in the floodplain, and use of fertilizers, pesticides, and/or herbicides to maintain the lawn add more potential pollutants to the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Turf grass does not have the same water absorption rate or retainment and filtration capabilities as native trees, shrubs, flowers, and other forbs. This area is comprised of hydric soils in a floodplain, and it consists of numerous valuable native plants. Pollinator friendly species such as Common Milkweed, Dogbane, Blue Mistflower, New York Ironweed, Wingstem, and asters bloom in the fall adjacent to the pond. Many mature oak trees and valuable understory trees such as American Holly and Common Paw Paw are found in addition to considerable Eastern Red Cedars. This forested floodplain should remain intact. Numerous invasive species are also found in this forested area including Autumn Olive and other species. It is recommended that the invasive species are removed and controlled, and further protections are given to allow native vegetation to thrive, such as protecting emerging oak seedlings, and enhancing the habitat for pollinators. Benches could be added adjacent to the pond to allow for wildlife viewing to enhance the passive recreation uses of the area. Planting a tree grove would be unnecessary, because an existing forest already exists.



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Area “13” & “2” Maintenance Facility and Parking Area:

- The proposed maintenance facility and parking area are inappropriate uses for a forested floodplain with hydric soils and a lower topography than the surrounding areas. While we appreciate the applicant’s assertion that chemicals, fuels, and fertilizers will not be stored at this facility, increasing impervious surfaces in this area is not an appropriate use and location for these facilities. The maintenance facilities could be located in another area in the area, for instance, adjacent to the current parking lot, which does not include hydric soils, and is located at a higher elevation.

Area “14” & “2” Gravel Driveway and Parking Area:

- While we appreciate the steps taken to protect tree roots at the kayak launch site, the road and parking area for the kayak launch are unnecessary. The current driveway is seldom used by vehicular traffic and only open to authorized access. While we understand the desire to access Broad Run and the Potomac River for kayak users, the increased vehicular traffic would lead to an increase in noise directly adjacent to the wetlands and sensitive species (described above) that reside there. An alternative would be to have the kayak launch and using the gravel driveway with carts to carry kayaks to the launch. We recognize this would require more work for kayak users, but it is a valuable restriction to protect the wetlands and sensitive wildlife from greater human disturbance.
- While we recognize there is a need for more onsite parking (due to a previous degradation of habitat in the major floodplain under the guise of expanding uses to meet increasing user needs), the expansion of the parking area should include pervious parking materials. The applicant has noted that “given the existing conditions, pervious paving for the parking areas is not ideal for this project and we are unable to commit to this request”. Given that the applicant cannot mitigate this increase of impervious surfaces, they should not be allowed to increase the parking area at this site.

In addition to the specific “enhancements” detailed above, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is concerned about negative impacts in general at this site to endangered and threatened species, and the exemplary wildlife habitat found throughout the park. Additionally, this proposal is not in compliance with the Comprehensive Plan.

Endangered and Threatened Species & Exemplary Wildlife Habitat:

- The Endangered and Threatened Species Review, dated December 3, 2018, identified the potential for white trout lily (state-rare species) and wood turtle (state-threatened) to occur on the park site. However, the applicant notes that an inventory of white trout lily and wood turtle will likely be conditions of the wetland permit process which will not begin until the time of site plan. That is unacceptable.
- As noted in the December 3 letter, wood turtles should be surveyed between December and mid-March, as they are easier to identify while hibernating in the stream during that time period. The applicant has had 3 years to identify if wood turtles are present at the site, and they have not surveyed the site to confirm, or deny, their existence.
- Additionally, white trout lily is a spring ephemeral flower that blooms in March each year, and the applicant has had 3 years to determine if they are present at the site. The December 3 letter noted that

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historically white trout lily has been identified within two miles of this site. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy can confirm their presence at Ball's Bluff Battlefield Park, located upstream from this site. The December 3 letter also noted that for the white trout lily, "state-rare is not a legal designation, therefore this species is not expected to pose a constraint to the issuance of wetland permits". These threatened and endangered species should have been monitored by the applicant during this application process. By the time the wetland permit process is initiated, it may be too late to adequately survey and protect these species, and the applicant has presented a misleading assertion that the white trout lily "will likely" be inventoried as part of the wetland permit process when a prior referral letter has stated otherwise.

- This year alone has seen Virginia species of concern including American Black Duck (Tier IIa), Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (Tier IIa), American Woodcock (Tier IIa), and Black-billed Cuckoo (Tier IIb) observed at Bles Park. Bles Park has some of the greatest biodiversity of bird species found in Loudoun County, and LWC leads monthly bird walks there due to its abundance. Numerous other species also thrive at Bles Park, and LWC leads other nature walks at the park as well.
- While we appreciate the applicant is agreeing to include additional tree conservation areas, existing trees should not be destroyed. Mature trees, especially within the major floodplain, offer significant ecosystem services including, but not limited to preserving water quality, erosion and sediment control, stormwater management, and providing wildlife habitat.
- The above species are only part of what make Bles Park a unique and special habitat, and Loudoun County should do more to protect their special places. While there is documentation of flora and fauna currently found at Bles Park in eBird and iNaturalist, more study of the natural features is needed to have a comprehensive understanding of the wildlife and habitat that is found there including, but not limited to, pollinator habitat that blooms in spring, summer, and fall. It is recommended that Bles Park is studied more thoroughly before wildlife habitat is destroyed to create more impervious surfaces. The proposed active and passive recreation uses could destroy the very habitat and wildlife that is trying to be enhanced, thus diminishing the value and benefit for recreation users and residents of Loudoun County.

Comprehensive Plan Compliance:

- While this proposal does fit within the suburban place type, active recreation uses are not an allowed use in a major floodplain in the Comprehensive Plan.
- While the applicant did move some proposed development outside of the Stream Valley Buffer, there are still impacts within the floodplain that is not in conformance with protecting River and Stream Corridor Resources.
- Community Planning Staff has stated that this application cannot be supported as proposed. Many of the mitigation measures they have recommended, *should this application move forward* (emphasis added), have not been implemented. While the applicant continues to request flexibility, the facts remain that this proposed application is not in compliance with the Comprehensive Plan. Furthermore, the applicant has not provided commitments to mitigate potential impacts. The bottom line is this application should not move forward as proposed.

Though the applicant claims that the more intensive uses are being redeveloped on top of already developed areas, that is simply not the case. The maintenance building, tennis and pickleball courts, unprogrammed lawn area, and boardwalk are not in previously developed areas. These enhancements would destroy the connection



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to the natural environment that these amenities seek to achieve. The current natural amenities already provide excellent passive recreation opportunities to address human mental and physical health needs. The proposed active recreation uses can, and should, be located at a different site, one without unique natural assets and exemplary wildlife habitat that is currently found at Bles Park.

Loudoun County should set an example for all applicants and residents that it is a good steward of the natural assets of the county, and that it will abide by its own plans, guidance, and regulations when developing property it owns. This proposed application does not conform to the Comprehensive Plan, and it is another example of the county trying to bend the rules at their convenience.

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy urges the Planning Commission to require the above modifications before this application moves forward. We understand the need to update park facilities, and we encourage passive recreation uses for residents to be able to experience nature, but we are gravely concerned the application in its current form would unnecessarily harm the exemplary wildlife habitats currently found at the site.

Sincerely,

Michael Myers
Executive Director

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