
Friends of Francis Field

2501 M Street NW #805
Washington, D.C. 20037

To: Chairperson Trayon White, Sr., and the Committee on Recreation, Libraries,
and Youth Affairs
Date: April 5, 2022
Re: Testimony for Oversight Hearing, regarding Department of Parks and Recreation
FY 2023 Budget and Mayor's request for \$3 million for Francis Field Renovation

We appreciate the opportunity to present our testimony to Chairperson White, and the Committee. We testified orally during the Committee's video-conferenced hearing on March 31, and submitted pre-hearing testimony. We appreciate the opportunity to file this extended written testimony to explain our position and provide background.

OUR POSITION

We support the request for Francis Field renovation, as this large public space is truly in need of repair, particularly on the playing-field area, which has not been improved by District government funding in at least 15 years, and not renovated since 1991, when it was turned over to a private university.

We ask further that this new funding be used to prioritize repair work and design that will make the Field safe for use by the elementary school and middle school children whose public education campus is on the same block as the Field in Ward 2. This is a K-through-8 school presently named the Francis-Stevens Education Campus.

Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A (ANC-2A) set out the priorities for Francis Field in a 2016 resolution that would guide the improvement of the field with private funding, and set goals for our organization's renewal of our 2013 partnership agreement with the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). ANC-2A stated that its "objectives for Francis Field" were to provide:

- A green, pleasant and safe recreation area
- Athletic field space for school, youth, and community sports
- Passive space for non-athletic rest and relaxation
- Provision for the daily needs of community pet owners
- An environment appropriate for its residential proximity
- A natural buffer area between Rock Creek Park and urbanization

Those objectives are still current, and our organization subscribes to them, but we do not oppose changes. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the playing field has deteriorated further through lack of maintenance. With the return of students to the school last fall, its athletic director was in contact with DPR about the poor conditions of the Field, including numerous holes described as "a major safety concern for our students and athletic operations." Repairing the field for school use should now, we believe, be the top priority.

We also are including here testimony relating to the historical aspects of the Field and the adjacent area; its partial ownership by the National Park Service; and photographs, plans, and graphics that will aid the Committee, and DPR, in understanding Francis Field as the important asset it is to the neighborhood, the District, and the landscaping of the nation’s capital.

LOCATION

The field is located on the west side of 25th Street NW, between M and N Streets, as indicated in Figure 01. It is entirely within the current boundary of ANC-2A, and in the West End neighborhood as defined by the District of Columbia Office of Planning.



Figure 01. Location of Francis Field on base map, showing area label “West End.”

FIELD CONDITIONS



Figure 02. Francis Field indicated in 2021 aerial photo from DC GIS Atlas Plus.

The natural-turf field is not well tended, and the species change color with the season. The aerial photo in Figure 02 above is the most recent. It appears to have been taken in winter. Most photos of the field in any season show it with large areas of bare dirt in the playing field area. Year to

year photographs show that it has existed in bad condition and need of maintenance. The field has had no irrigation system for the last 28 years.



Figure 03. School Without Walls, Field Hockey on Francis Field, 19 Sep 2013.

The location of a non-functioning irrigation system under the field is shown by the green vegetation lines in Figure 03 above, as the old pipes appear to trap water at certain places.

The system under the field is no longer connected to a water source. The old control valve has been vandalized and abandoned, but it still creates an obstacle and hazard in the passive park area to the east of the playing field. It is shown below in Figure 04.



Figure 04. Obsolete 1991 Irrigation Valve.

RECENT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1990, the mayor at the time turned Francis Field over to George Washington University, which transformed the Field into an irrigated diamond for its varsity baseball team, as shown in Figure 05 below.



Figure 05. Francis Field after renovation into baseball diamond by George Washington University, 1991.

But it was abandoned two years later and the irrigation was not maintained. The playing field surface turned to dust in the summer and mud in wet weather. The aerial photo in Figure 06 below shows the condition about ten years later:



Figure 06. Francis Field condition in 2002 aerial photo.

THE 2007 ZONING CASE AND MASTER PLAN

Our organization became involved in the improvement of Francis Field when, as neighbors, we became a party in a March 2007 Zoning Commission case for the conversion of two office buildings on 25th Street NW into a single residential building.¹



Figure 07. Architectural rendering of 1225 25th Street conversion from office to residential use.

That case changed the architectural fabric of the field from one with a chain-link fence and plastic trash cans, to a more park-like environment, with space for passive recreation as well as for field sports.



Figure 08. Architectural fabric of Francis Field, before Zoning Case.

That was done on paper, at least, in a landscape plan ordered by the Zoning Commission, developed by DPR with community and stakeholder input, and reviewed by the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts. The review was required by federal law, as the field is partially owned by the National Park Service, and is part of Rock Creek Park and Parkway.



Figure 09. Master Landscape Plan submitted by DPR and approved by Commission of Fine Arts, 2009.

More about the partial National Park Service ownership of Francis Field can be found in a section further below.



Figure 10. Implementation of landscape plan to create passive space, February 2009.

In the Zoning Case, the developer provided a new fence, benches, a drinking fountain, and other improvements, but no change or improvement was made to the playing field. Only the east edge of the field was converted to passive recreation space. All the improvements shown below, in Figure 11, were provided with private funding.



Figure 11. Completion of passive park space outside playing field, July 2010.

In 2008, DPR signed an agreement with a private soccer league to resurface the field with artificial turf, and make it a semi-professional soccer venue. However, the National Park Service would not--and probably never will--allow its part of the Field to be surfaced with artificial turf.

An official dog park was added to the north of Francis Field in 2015 as shown in Figure 12 below, but nothing was done to improve the playing field area, which continued to be mostly bare dirt from too much use and too little maintenance.



Figure 12. Francis Field with dog park added at north end in 2015 aerial photo, DC GIS.



Figure 13. Francis Field condition in April 25, 2016 before experimental greening program.

In 2017, our organization, working with Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A, and in partnership with DPR and the National Park Service (NPS), began an effort to improve the passive space by planting additional trees, and growing grass on the playing field, using private funding to restore the natural turf.

NPS set the specifications for the work on its portion of the field, which were adopted for the whole project. No herbicides were used, organic fertilizer was required, and the seed was a mixture of Kentucky Bluegrass and Tall Fescue.

The field was closed for one season to allow the new grass to grow, along with the all the existing species that provided green, living turf.

Figure 14 below shows some of the volunteers from Friends of Francis Field and the Casey Tree Foundation who planted 43 trees and watered them for two years. Those and other trees are now part of the a Francis Tree Lab project in which we participated with the Urban Forestry Division of DDOT and Casey Trees. That project cares for the trees and replaces dead, damaged, and unhealthy ones with new plantings.



Figure 14. Volunteer tree planting on passive park space, May 13, 2017.



Figure 15. De-compacting playing field soil with tine aerator, June 2017.

The field was closed by DPR to permitting and play beginning June 19, 2017. De-compacting the field's hard-packed surface with a tine aerator was the first step. Summer was not the ideal time for planting grass, but the dates were set by DPR.



Figure 16. Early view of progress, July 13, 2017.

Wooden snow fence was installed temporarily to keep players off the newly-planted grass. Seed species were chosen by an NPS horticulturist.



Figure 17. One of ten portable sprinklers for irrigation. Snow fence is shown in background.

Due to the limited water supply, irrigation for the new seed was provided by a temporary sprinkler system, run from one hose bib located on the swimming pool building, with each sprinkler on a battery-powered timer set so they operated one at a time.



Figure 18. Second seeding of grass: Kentucky Bluegrass and Tall Fescue, October 6, 2017.



Figure 19. Snow fence removal on March 13, 2018, for opening of field to permitting and play on March 19.



Figure 20. School Without Walls High School lacrosse teams practice on restored turf, April 11, 2018.



Figure 21. Best field conditions shown on reopened Francis Field in photo of May 27, 2018, after spring rains.

PERMITTING AND MAINTENANCE IMBALANCE, 2018-2022

Unfortunately, permitting by DPR and maintenance by the Department of General Services continued out of balance, and Francis Field rapidly deteriorated. The amount of adult play increased dramatically after kick-ball leagues were issued permits for the first time in the spring of 2018.



Figure 22. Kick-ball league playing with multiple teams on different sections of Francis Field, May 6, 2018.



Figure 23. Kick-ball league and deteriorating field conditions, April 16, 2019.



Figure 24. Holes, trench, and field damage, May 2019.



Figure 25. Field Condition, September 8, 2019.



Figure 26. Field Condition, March 29, 2020, after field closed because of Covid-19 health emergency.



Figure 25. Field Condition, March 26, 2021.



Figure 26. Sprinkler head tripping hazards, November 16, 2021.

The soil in several places is so worn down that sprinkler heads from the old irrigation system now protrude above the field surface, causing tripping hazards.

Recently, working with our Advisory Neighborhood Commission, we have requested DPR to prioritize making the field safe for school children. The former junior high school on the same block is now a K-through-8 school called the Francis-Stevens Education Campus.



Figure 27. Elementary school pupils on Francis Field for after-school soccer practice, September 29, 2021.



Figure 28. Soccer practice for middle school students on Francis Field, October 15, 2021.

FRANCIS FIELD'S ROLE AS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

Shown in Figure 29 below is a map issued by Rock Creek Park to show the federal reservation that makes up part of Francis Field. The part not owned by NPS and managed by DPR is shaded with diagonal lines. It makes up a little more than half of the playing field area.



Figure 29. National Park Service map of 2008 showing DPR part of Francis Field with hash lines.

The land that makes up Francis Field was purchased by Congress, beginning in 1913, for the purpose of landscape architecture. The design of the “border parks” of Rock Creek Park and Parkway was the work of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

In a 1902 report of the Senate Park Commission, the area of the proposed parkway between Q Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, was occupied by poor quality housing and light industry, with much dumping of debris into Rock Creek. It was called “unsightly to the verge of ugliness.”²

Olmsted designed a system of “border parks” to be a buffer between the natural state of Rock Creek Park, and the urbanity of Washington, D.C. These border areas would be cleared of buildings back to the nearest streets, and planted with trees and otherwise landscaped so that users of the park and parkway would not look up and see smokestacks, telephone poles, outhouses, and laundry lines. His suggested treatment is shown below in Figure 30:

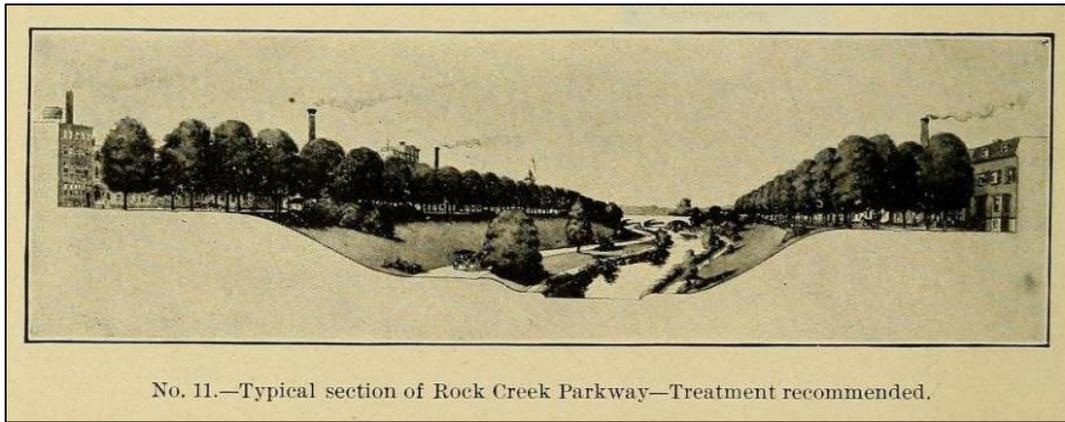


Figure 30. Olmsted illustration from *McMillan Commission Report* of 1902, p. 86.

One of Olmsted’s border parks is what we know today as Francis Field. His design to line the borders of Rock Creek Park and Parkway with trees and border parks was carried out the by the purchase of land to provide tree cover and grassy park space. The 2010 aerial photo below shows how Francis Field plays a role in implementing that design.



Figure 31. Aerial view of 2010 shows how Francis Field, lower left of photo, plays a role in landscape architecture.

CONCLUSION

Francis Field is a valuable asset of the District of Columbia, and provides an important recreation space. The passive park space is in good condition, but the largest area of the field, the playing field area, is in very poor condition, and not entirely safe for the public-school children for whom it should be a pleasant space for field sports that teach teamwork and good sportsmanship.

The field also plays a role in landscape architecture, and it should be appropriately designed for the residential neighborhood for which it is now an integral part--as it was intended to be.

Overuse by adult teams and lack of maintenance by the District government should be corrected and balanced, so that adult use does not ruin the field and make it dangerous for children.

We ask that the Council approve the Mayor's budget request for Francis Field renovation, as this large public space is truly in need of repair, particularly on the playing-field area, which has not been improved by the District government in at least fifteen years.

We ask further that this funding be used in prioritizing work that will make Francis Field safe for use by the elementary school and middle school children whose public education campus is on the same block as the field.

We believe that the updated master plan for Francis Field, approved in 2020, will be helpful in the renovation, and we have attached it here as an appendix.

We appreciate the attention of Chairperson White and the Committee, and thank them for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Gary Griffith, President
Friends of Francis Field

