

Symmes Advisory Committee Public Use Working Group

MEMORANDUM

TO: SAC
FROM: Brian Rehrig for the PUWG
DATE: March 6, 2003
RE: Recommendations: Symmes Vista Park and "Ridge" Parcel

As the SAC enters this next stage of its work, the Public Use Working Group feels that it is critical to the eventual success of the project that the SAC clearly articulate the specific preferences, requirements, desires and goals that are the results of its deliberations, so that those guidelines can carry through the Urban Renewal Plan and zoning revisions by Town Meeting, the SAC's direction to the ARB, through the RFP to the development community.

To that end, the PUWG will offer some specific recommendations for your consideration in the hope that these can be adopted as part of the Committee's formal guidelines. Two recommendations are attached. (On one other issue, the proposed improvement of the Summer Street site as a Memorial Grove by the Cemetery Commission, the PUWG will offer a recommendation after receipt of additional information from the Commission, expected within the week.)

The first is a proposed description of the Symmes Vista Park, a feature common to all of our alternatives although never formally adopted by SAC. We feel it is important for SAC to articulate the characteristics and features desired in this amenity, leaving to the RFP respondents the latitude to creatively satisfy those requirements. We recommend that SAC incorporate the Vista Park as a requirement for the project, and adopt this extended description as a design guideline.

The second recommendation is a statement of preferred uses for the non-medical portion of the "Ridge" parcel. As we all know, the "Community Wellness Center" concept that would synergistically combine a full-featured Community Center with health care provider space has proven to be untenable due to traffic and parking constraints, and the complex planned for the parcel has been reduced in size. Given that restriction, we recommend that the preferred non-medical use be an aquatics facility. This preference is based on our perception of need in the community, the lack of such facilities or of alternative sites for one, the synergy with wellness and health care that aquatics provide, and the potential for creating an excellent facility in the space potentially available without overburdening the site. We are not recommending a non-aquatics fitness facility except as an adjunct to the aquatics, as such facilities are available elsewhere. We urge the SAC to adopt a clear statement of preferences and priorities for this complex.

Thank you for considering these recommendations, and the Working Group looks forward to continuing to assist SAC in creating its guidelines for this project.

Symmes Vista Park

Arlington has a unique opportunity to protect and enhance the natural amenities of this dramatic hilltop site. A "scenic vista park" has been a priority of the Public Use Working Group throughout the planning process because the vistas of the entire Boston basin from this site should be made accessible to all of the Town's residents. The vista park would retain the name Symmes, for historic and commemorative reasons, and should exemplify the vision of a unique community resource that the town can be proud of for decades to come.

Characteristics:

- a substantial public gathering place landscaped as a park that takes best advantage of the views from the top of the hill
- an open, welcoming space, not compromised or assimilated by other development on the site
- a space well-integrated with other public amenities on the site, such as public buildings, walking trails, and parking

Special Features:

- an amphitheater or other outdoor gathering area for public concerts, educational programs and meetings
- landscape gardens composed of native plant materials, terraced to take advantage of the natural topography
- walking trails connecting with other open areas of the site, and beyond
- a simple observation tower or viewing platform
- a skywalk connection to the "Ridge" portion of the site providing pedestrian access to Summer Street which avoids Hospital Road.
- benches and other amenities for eating and relaxing
- free public parking
- outdoor sculpture, which might include works by Dallin and/or other local artists chosen through public competition

Ridge parcel preferred uses

The SAC has expressed the priority use for the 'Ridge' parcel as a flexible combination of medical and 'fitness activity' facilities, the proportions of which are to be determined by further study and market response.

We recommend to the SAC that it state the preferred use of the non-medical portion of this complex to be an aquatics facility of high quality, scaled appropriately to serve our community, and designed to address the varying needs of constituencies including families, recreational swimmers, rehabilitation and therapy patients, and school teams.

We further recommend, without prejudice for or against any model of ownership or operation of the facility, that it is highly preferred that such a facility be accessible and affordable to both a "broad cross-section" and a "significant number" of Arlingtonians, in keeping with the criteria for success previously adopted.

We further recommend, in the event that for any reason it proves infeasible to develop a significant medical component on this parcel, that the preferred alternative for the parcel be an integrated "Community Center" as originally conceived, to be prototyped at commercial market rates.