

Statement in Opposition to Using Blake Lane Park as a School Site

Phil Niedzielski-Eichner, Candidate for Providence District Supervisor

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Fairfax County is at an inflection point in its history. Its residents are experiencing the loss of open space more acutely now than ever before. At the same time that the public is clamoring for more open space for recreation and leisure enjoyment, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) is moving to build a new school on land that has been a public park for decades. If I am elected to become the Providence Supervisor, I will oppose conveying the property to FCPS for this purpose.

Blake Lane Park is the largest open space available for public use in the Oakton area and is home to the only off-leash dog park in Providence District. Forty years ago, when development was booming and land was plentiful, the prospect of maintaining in inventory a 10-acre parcel as a school site was appropriately viewed as good planning.

Fast forward to today and the Blake Lane "school site" is surrounded by high-density development, consisting of townhomes, condominiums, and single-family homes, that are home to hundreds of families. This area has evolved into one of great ethnic and economic diversity. The area is also an enclave of affordable housing, another increasingly scarce community resource. During the last year or so, for example, more than 70% of area homes sold for less than \$400,000.

What was once for FCPS an easy business decision to build an elementary school on a site dedicated for school use is now a much more complicated one in which community values are in conflict. Blake Lane Park represents a convergence of Fairfax commitments to (a) quality public education; (b) environmental quality -- including protecting the wildlife and natural vegetation; and (c) equity, as espoused through the Board of Supervisors and School Board's joint commitments in their One Fairfax Policy.

In weighing these competing values, the scale tips in favor of maintaining scarce open space that once lost cannot be recovered, over building an elementary school.

Both Fairfax County and the City of Fairfax School systems have a stake in this matter. I call on the School Boards of both jurisdictions to collaborate on finding a solution to the challenge of meeting the facility needs of the growing student population without building a school on the Blake Lane site.

As the current Planning Commissioner and former School Board member representing Providence District, I am acutely aware of the challenges facing the school system to accommodate increasing numbers of school-aged children. I also know because of my close review of the Capital Improvement Program over many years that FCPS maintains an imbalance in the use of its school facilities. Simply put, FCPS has overcrowded schools and underutilized schools, often within geographic proximity.

Further, FCPS will need to continue on its path to adapting its school facility design to meet the realities of today's circumstances. Economics and plentiful land permitted schools with horizontal design on large footprints. Land scarcity and the community's expectation for keeping an inventory of open space and parks will today drive a more vertical design on a smaller footprint. Additionally, FCPS will need to

consider repurposing empty or obsolete commercial or office buildings and/or reuse already developed land to meet its facility needs.

I commend FCPS for already moving in this direction. Bailey's Upper Elementary School, for example, is a creative response to the changing landscape confronting FCPS. I will support exploring such a creative response to meeting school population needs in Providence District.

Finally, public officials are obligated to be transparent and engaged with their constituents, particularly on matters as sensitive as the potential loss of open space. In this regard, I was surprised to learn that the decision to transform Blake Lane into a school site – a matter of great consequence to the area residents – was made before the community was informed of the project. The community was further surprised to learn that design work for the \$35 million construction cost was already embedded in the voter-approved 2017 School Bond Referendum.

The community mistrust and anger that resulted from the lack of communication on this matter could and should have been avoided.

FCPS must develop alternatives other than building the new school at Blake Lane Park. The permanent loss of scarce park land and open space is not justified and should only ever be considered as a very last resort. Should FCPS want to revisit this matter in the years ahead, the School Board must first engage openly and transparently with the community and the community must be a partner in this decision.