

# Garrett Park Nursery School

September 3, 2007

Mary Bradford, Director of Parks  
Royce Hanson, Chairman and Vice-Chairman  
John M. Robinson, Vice-Chairman and Commissioner  
Allison Bryant, PhD, Planning Board Member and Commissioner  
Jean Cryor, Planning Board Member and Commissioner  
Eugene Lynch, Planning Board Member and Commissioner  
The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission  
Montgomery County Planning Board  
8787 Georgia Avenue  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Chairman Hanson:

The Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School Board of Directors takes this opportunity to voice our objection to the inclusion of Garrett Park Estates Recreation Center on the list of "transfer or demolish" properties designated in the "Functional Plan for Recreation and Ancillary Buildings: Preliminary Staff Recommendations ("Staff Report") as presented at the June 28, 2007 meeting of the Montgomery County Planning Board and to offer our preliminary comments on the Staff Report.

Our purpose in initiating contact with the Planning Board with respect to the Staff Report is to impress upon the Board the significance of this issue to the continued existence of the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School after this school year. **Our primary goal is to continue to operate, both in the short term and long term, a high-quality preschool education program for our students and their parents.**

Enrolling children in a preschool in Montgomery County is not a decision that parents take lightly. Parents in Montgomery County register their children in preschool a full year or more in advance of enrollment. The Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School made a commitment to our current membership; for families of our youngest students, this is a three-year commitment. We feel that families that have chosen to enroll their children in the 2s class at Garrett Park Nursery School for the 2007-2008 school year deserve the opportunity to have their children spend their vital, formative preschool years in the same school. **Our immediate request is that our permit for use of this building be renewed through the end of the 2009-2010 school year when Garrett Park Elementary School is scheduled to close for renovations.**

As we hope you can understand, many of us were alarmed to have first learned about this proposal from the “Montgomery Extra” section of the July 25, 2007 edition of *The Washington Post*. The manner in which this proposal reached our membership has resulted in a level of uncertainty to our current membership and those who intend to enroll their children in the future. We believe it is imperative to immediately improve the communications and coordination surrounding this important matter.

### **Background on Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School**

The Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School is licensed by the Montgomery County Office of Child Care and approved by Maryland State Department of Education. We have provided a preschool education program for two-, three- and four-year-old children and their families in this community for over 50 years. During this time hundreds of children have received their first educational experience at the not-for-profit Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School. In addition, because we are a cooperative nursery school, our program has involved the active participation of hundreds of parents as well. Our current enrollment for the upcoming 2007-2008 school year is 41 students and their parents. We are at full enrollment with a waiting list for each class. We expect the demand for our program to increase upon the completion of several new housing developments less than one mile from our school.

### **Background on Garrett Park Estates Park Recreation Center Building**

Below is a short history of the construction of the facility that was supplied by the Mayor of Garrett Park, Ms. Carolyn Shawaker. The project began in 1947 and involved a close partnership among the Town of Garrett Park, the Garrett Park Woman’s Club, residents of Garrett Park and the Montgomery County Department of Parks. Several thousand hours of local volunteer labor were donated to construct the building. There is much wisdom in the following excerpt from a section of this history written by former Mayor George Payne in 1952:

But, quite apart from the building itself, the manner of its erection has a value which was well expressed by the Woman’s Club when it said, in a report on the project: ‘We believe that the building of our Center can serve as a pattern for cooperative action between government bodies and citizens in many communities. We did not wait for government to do something for us. At the same time, we could not have done the job unaided. Cooperation between citizen groups and government agencies can bring about benefits which neither could achieve alone, and at the same time foster a vigorous and self-reliant democracy. Finally, the Center means much more to us than it would have if the Park and Planning Commission had given it to us without effort on our own part. It is our Center.’ Yes, it is our Center – not to hold selfishly but to share willingly with all those in our community who, through the accidental timing of

their arrival here, missed some of the rewarding experience of its creation. It is a monument to the spirit of Garrett Park.

With this background about this facility that has been our home since October 2, 1953, we hope you can better understand why the Staff Report recommendation to remove us from this location without deference to either its or the school's historical significance and importance to the community is of great concern to us. To paraphrase the Supreme Court in its famous *Dartmouth College* decision: We may be a small school in an old facility, but there are those of us who love it.

### **Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School Past Relationship with Parks Department**

We have enjoyed good relations with the Montgomery County Department of Parks and wish to continue to do so. For example, in the fall of 2005 a Planner from the Department of Parks contacted us to ensure that we had an opportunity to partner with Garrett Park Elementary School, Montgomery County Public Schools, and the Department of Parks before and during the construction of the GPES addition located immediately adjacent to our building. The safety of our children and safe and continuous access to our school were our two major concerns. We were invited to attend meetings with all the decision makers and were asked to testify before this Planning Board on these matters. We appreciated the consideration we were given in the planning process and throughout the construction process.

### **Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School's Response to Staff Recommendations**

As residents, taxpayers and voters, we understand the need for Montgomery County to optimize the use of its park buildings. We share an interest to address the problem described on Page 5 of the June 28<sup>th</sup> Memorandum to Planning Board: "We have too many buildings with too much unused time; we are losing money and have too large a future maintenance problem." In identifying problems, framing alternative solutions, and making fair decisions with respect to these facilities, it is important that all stakeholders benefit from the best available information. Frankly, in a number of respects, the process to date has raised some serious concerns that we wish to bring to your attention and address:

1) As a threshold matter, we strongly believe it would have been appropriate and constructive to involve the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School in this process at an earlier time, as occurred when the addition to the Garrett Park Elementary School was constructed. We are unaware of any consultation between any official of the Department of Parks or other county official with any member of the Board or Staff of the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School in the drafting of the Staff Report. We will work with all involved to correct this deficiency in communications and expect that our efforts will be reciprocated.

2) We are concerned that a fair reading of the Staff Report and a review of the recording of the June 28<sup>th</sup> Planning Board meeting reveals a strong sense that tearing down the facility is something of a “done deal.” We believe that the Montgomery County Planning Board, Montgomery County Department of Parks, Montgomery County Public Schools *and* the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School and its membership should all approach this issue with open minds and a measure of flexibility. We are hopeful that we can all find a satisfactory resolution to this matter. We note that the June 28<sup>th</sup> memorandum speaks of soliciting public comment about the Staff Report and contemplates modifications of the recommendations based upon the response of the public and other public agencies. Despite this apparent open, evolving process the Staff Report contains a number of telling statements, such as:

A) “This property could provide a larger site for development of the new Garrett Park Estates (sic) Elementary School.” (Page 11). The discussion at the June 28<sup>th</sup> meeting seemed to indicate that the Department of Parks has already been in substantive discussions with the Montgomery County Public Schools over this issue.

B) “The Garrett Park Estates Local Park potential land transfer with (MCPS) will require a Fall 2007 public meeting due to the schedule of the proposed reconstruction of the Garrett Park Elementary School.” (Page 6) Given the definitive nature of the discussion of this facility elsewhere in the Report and at the June 28<sup>th</sup> meeting, it appears that the use of the word “will” rather than “would” in this sentence is indicative of a decision that has been made rather than a decision to be made.


3) We believe that the presentation at the June 28<sup>th</sup> Planning Board Meeting did not communicate several material facts to the Planning Board. The discussion at the June 28<sup>th</sup> meeting included generic references to the “current tenants” and “users” of the facility, yet the identity and long involvement of the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School in this community at this site was not even mentioned at the meeting or in the Staff Report. We recognize that the staff of the Department of Parks as well as the Planning Board is called upon to address the concerns of a great many of tenants in managing this overall facility project. We do believe, however, that given our long history in this building and our important educational mission, it would have been appropriate to present at least some information to the Planning Board, both in the Staff Report and at the meeting, about our school.


Statements at the June 28<sup>th</sup> meeting pertaining to conversations with the “folks in school” and “school folks” regarding the potential land transfer could have led to the erroneous conclusion that all involved on this site were aware of, and in general agreement with, the Staff Report recommendation. We commend the apparent pre-Staff Report consultation between the Parks Department and representatives of the Garrett Park Elementary School and/or Montgomery County Public Schools. No one should conclude that any such similar discussions took place with the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School or that

we are in agreement with a proposal which we had not been informed of or helped develop.

We thank you for your service on the Planning Board, and we look forward to working closely with you, the Planning staff, the Montgomery County Public Schools, and others to attempt to reach an outcome agreeable to all involved. Let me emphasize again our interest in proceeding in a manner that best promotes and is the least disruptive to the current and future ability of the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School to continue to serve our young students and their parents in this community. We have designated Brenda Artim, Director of the Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School, at as our point of contact on this issue. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

On Behalf of the Board of Directors,  
Garrett Park Cooperative Nursery School

  
Gerilee Bennett  
Co-President

  
Ellen Saltzman  
Co-President

Cc: Chris Van Hollen, U.S. House of Representatives  
Ike Leggett, Montgomery County Executive  
Jennie M. Forehand, Maryland State Senate  
Brian Frosh, Maryland State Senate  
Kumar Barve, Maryland House of Delegates  
James Gilchrist, Maryland House of Delegates  
Luiz R.S. Simmons, Maryland House of Delegates  
Roger Berliner, Montgomery County Council  
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Marc Elrich, Montgomery County Council  
Nancy Floreen, Montgomery County Council  
Carolyn Shawaker, Mayor, Town of Garrett Park  
Mark Wallis, Park and Planning Resource Analysis