

## **Blandair Master Plan – A Synopsis of the Three Public Meetings**

August 15, 2003

Over the last two weeks of July and the first week of August, the Department of Recreation and Parks and the Blandair Planning Committee hosted three public meetings to receive input about the Blandair Master Plan Concept. The meetings were held at two high schools and one middle school within the boundaries of the service area of Blandair Park.

The Master Plan Concept was the result of a 19-month process of analysis and deliberation by the Blandair Planning Committee, composed of 23 Howard County citizens appointed by the County Executive. They represented a wide range of interests and expertise, including environmental specialists, historical preservationists, traffic engineer, landscape architects, sports team representatives, planners, an attorney, and a former resident of Blandair, as well as representatives of the surrounding communities. Their efforts and consensus on park components formulated the Master Plan Concept.

A total of 274 people attended the public meetings and the Department received 14 e-mails. Of the 274 people who attended the meetings, 78 people testified and provided input to the committee about their concerns. We have categorized the concerns into 13 areas, which are listed below. The Blandair Planning Committee and the Department of Recreation and Parks is responding to those areas of concern.

### 1. Park Access

The first area of concern, on which we received 31 comments, is the access of the Blandair property by secondary entrances, other than those proposed from Route 175. These are Summer Hollow, through the Glenmont community; Timesweep Lane through the Oakland Mills community; and from the north and south entrances of Oakland Mills Road which would be closed to thru-traffic as it passes through the south portion of Blandair.

The reasons for secondary access points are:

- 1) to provide direct access to passive recreation areas (picnic areas and playgrounds) from adjacent communities;
- 2) to enable access by emergency vehicles;
- 3) to avoid parking by visitors along community streets by providing internal parking lots;
- 4) to eliminate the need to bisect natural areas and wildlife corridors by park roads.

Summer Hollow was the logical access point since it is a double-lane street without any driveways entering onto the road proper. The small park development in the northwest corner is similar to Centennial Park East area, which has access via Woodland Road to Pavilion H and its amenities, a playground and tennis court. It was the intention to

provide the Thunder Hill community and the Glenmont community with a small neighborhood park so that these communities could access recreational facilities without getting into their car and driving all the way to Route 175 to enter the park.

It was also the wish of the Committee, that as many bicycle and/or pedestrian accesses to the park be established by continuing the already existing Columbia Association pathways. Summer Hollow Lane, from our research, is a road that was intended to provide vehicular access to the Smith Farm. When Route 175 and Summer Hollow were constructed, it was anticipated that the Smith property would eventually be sold, and any development would require vehicular access to Route 108 and Route 175. Although development was never realized, Summer Hollow Lane has been stubbed at the property line for future access.

Two earlier traffic studies were conducted at the request of the Glenmont community on Summer Hollow; however, it appeared to the Committee that the traffic count was not substantial enough at the present time to preclude the development of a through-access to the picnicking and passive recreation facilities at the northwest corner of Blandair.

The Committee decided that if a access was provided at the northwest corner via a pedestrian and/or bike pathway, park users would park along the streets within the Glenmont community, which would negatively impact the people who are closest to the park. Therefore, the Committee determined that access to the park by vehicle to an internal parking lot was warranted.

## 2. Preserving Natural Areas

The second area that received numerous comments at the public meetings was concern for preservation of the natural setting of Blandair. The Blandair Committee and the Department of Recreation and Parks contracted for an environmental analysis of the park to identify the wetlands, forest cover and mature tree stands that would warrant preservation and non-disturbance. After analyzing the report, it was established that there are approximately 81.5 acres of forest cover that can be considered as a high priority forest area. There are 42.5 acres of low priority forest, consisting of saplings, invasive plants and noxious weeds. The forest study recommends preserving a minimum of 52 acres of forest. The master plan concept preserves approximately 180 acres of natural area. Over 60% of the entire property has been preserved or earmarked for preservation. In addition, the Committee recommends increasing the forested buffer around the entire perimeter to a width of [25-50 feet] **100 feet**. The areas where active recreation, historic and operational activities will occur are the areas that have been, for many years, used as farmland for crops and pasture. The Committee feels it has done a commendable job in trying to preserve as much of the natural setting on the Blandair property as possible, and at the same time achieving its goal of providing a balance of active and passive recreation facilities for the citizens of Howard County.

## 3. Traffic

The third largest area of concern was traffic. The Blandair Planning Committee and the Department of Recreation and Parks commissioned a traffic study that concluded: There is enough traffic on Route 175, with the addition of the planned activities at Blandair Regional Park to warrant a traffic light between Thunder Hill Road and Tamar Drive on Route 175 and, secondly, that the closing of Oakland Mills Road would not impact negatively on the surrounding community intersections. The traffic study indicated that there are several criteria that justify a red light between Tamar Drive and Thunder Hill Road, as the proposed entrance to the north and south sections of Blandair Regional Park. Closing Oakland Mills Road to through-traffic within the south portion of Blandair Regional Park would allow for greater safety in the park. It would also allow pedestrians free access to various recreation activities across the south portion. The traffic study indicated that the surrounding intersections to Oakland Mills Road would not have a sufficient increase in traffic to be classified as failing because of this road closure. The Committee also looked at the possibility of providing a round-about at the intersection of Montgomery Road and Oakland Mills Road where the park can be entered from the southeast corner. In summary, the Committee, after reviewing this traffic study, agreed that the main entry to the north and south sections would be from Route 175, via a stop-lighted intersection between Tamar and Thunder Hill Road, and secondary entrances would be ***Oakland Mills Road (from northwest and southeast)***, Summer Hollow and Timesweep Lane, based on the fact that minimal impact to the surrounding intersections would not cause any of them to fail because of increased traffic flow.

#### 4. Park Lighting

The next area of concern was park lighting. The Blandair Committee agreed that the lighting of athletic fields was an issue that should be decided during design, but the Department of Recreation and Parks informed the Committee that there is an existing policy that calls for athletic fields to be lighted on all developed regional parks. The lights that would be on the athletic fields would be the non-glare; non-spill, technically advanced lighting systems that provide the least impact on surrounding communities. The parking lots would also have the low lighting effect, with security lighting on some pathways, which would also be considered low-light illumination. The lighting of athletic facilities and the positioning of the athletic fields are such that the impact to the surrounding communities would be minimized. The Department of Recreation and Parks supports lights because the lights provide an additional 50% usage of these facilities, thus requiring fewer athletic fields on the site.

#### 5. ADA Issues

The fifth concern was for accessible playgrounds and pathways. The Department of Recreation and Parks informed the Blandair Committee that they are obligated to follow all ADA requirements in the construction and development of pathways and playgrounds. It is fully intended that one of the playgrounds at Blandair Regional Park will be fully accessible to children with disabilities and they will be able to participate in the activities on that playground. ***All other playgrounds will be, at least, partially accessible.*** The

majority of the pathways developed in Blandair will be hard-surfaced with the exception of the nature trails serving the proposed nature center. It was felt that some of the trails through the more environmentally-sensitive areas should be constructed of porous materials that would allow for natural infiltration. We will instruct the engineers to investigate and make recommendations on the latest porous materials for path surfaces.

#### 6. Parking

The sixth concern was the parking lots, specifically regarding storm-water runoff and the need for bus parking. The Blandair Planning Committee suggested that adequate parking be provided for the planned activities in each area of development. The required number of parking spaces will be developed during the design process. At the nature center, as well as the children's garden and historic complex, there will be a need for a turn-around, drop-off area and parking for school buses. This need will be addressed. The Department will follow all the storm-water guidelines that it must adhere to in the development of the parking areas for the park, including those that may have a gravel or turf surface.

#### 7. Balanced Activities – North and South

The seventh area of concern was to strike a balance between activities on the north and the south portions of Blandair Regional Park. The Blandair Planning Committee, concurred that this was an important issue. The south side is surrounded by communities, single-family residences and multi-family complexes. The majority of that 95-acre parcel has been farmed over the years, and has level and open conditions, which can support a variety of active recreation features. The location of Oakland Mills High School warrants significant athletic field development on the south side to accommodate the shortage of fields at the high school. The playgrounds proposed on the south side are intended for use by the higher-density housing surrounding the park and the many residents who can walk or bike to enjoy active recreation opportunities. The north side is more of an environmentally sensitive area in that it has the majority of contiguous forest cover and wetlands that warrant preservation. The few athletic fields on the north are located on level fields transversed by an underground gas line. The communities surrounding the park will be served by the active recreation areas as well as the passive picnic groves and playground at the northwest corner of Blandair Park. The children's garden planned for the north side will be a very active participatory-learning and inter-active feature of Blandair Regional Park.

#### 8. Wildlife

The eighth concern was wildlife. The Blandair Planning Committee was concerned about the preservation of the wildlife habitat and recognized that the Department of Recreation and Parks regularly establishes [a land] *Natural Resource* management plans, which include the creation and preservation of wildlife habitat in all of its regional parks. They recommend that the largest portion of the property, approximately 60%, will remain in its natural state and there should be little disturbance of the wildlife habitat.

There are adequate wildlife corridors for animals, including deer, to transition from one area of the park to the next. The experience of Recreation and Parks [naturalists] **Natural Resource Managers** is that deer have a tendency to stay within a 1 to 1 ½ mile-radius feeding area. The outer perimeters of the park will not be fenced, so there will continue to be unrestricted movement across the boundaries, as it presently occurs. The results we have received so far, from our FLIR survey, indicate that there are between 130-150 deer on the Blandair property. This is far too many deer in one location. If that number of deer remains, there will be damage to the natural areas of the park, and the growth of various species of vegetation will be stunted.

The Department of Recreation of Parks is planning its first bow hunt on the Blandair property this fall, and will continue to hunt the property until the maximum deer population [for a given square mile is realized (15)]. **is in compliance with Department of Natural Resource recommendations.** [The Department of Recreation and Parks has contracted with a bow-hunting group, an organization of highly-qualified bow hunters, that will hunt the different areas of Blandair. **Hunters**] will utilize tree stands to ensure that the path of any arrows will be aimed downward, as a safety precaution.

#### 9. Historic Preservation

The ninth concern was preserving the Blandair Mansion. The Blandair Planning Committee and the Department of Recreation and Parks has initiated repairs, utilizing preservation techniques, at the Mansion to stop the deterioration that has occurred over the last several years. The Department of Recreation and Parks has contracted with the National Park Service to restore the Mansion to its former state. **Outbuildings are also being assessed for restoration in the future.** This will take several years of work by the National Park Service that will be dictated by the budgetary allocation for this contract. It is hoped by the Committee and the Department, that one day Blandair will be an outstanding example of historic preservation exemplifying the rich agrarian history of Howard County.

#### 10. Budget

The budget was the next concern. Park development in Howard County is based on the budgetary allotment available through the County Executive and County Council on an annual basis. It is estimated that Blandair Regional Park could cost between \$13-\$15 million to develop. The Department of Recreation and Parks will pursue grants for historic preservation and facility construction to offset the local taxpayers' cost of this park. The park will be developed in phases and the cost will be offset somewhat by Program Open Space funds. The average capital budget of the Department of Recreation and Parks over the last five years is \$5.1 million. With this limited allocation, it will be necessary to have several phases, from design to final construction. It is estimated that the park will have an operating cost of at least \$250,000 a year, which would include a full time staff of five to six employees.

## 11. Noise Buffering

The 11<sup>th</sup> area of concern was the noise that would be generated by the park. The Blandair Planning Committee and the Department of Recreation and Parks have considered the surrounding neighborhoods in the development of the master plan in that the more active facilities are located in areas that are buffered by vegetation and/or distance, or are in the center portion of the north side of the park. Sounds from this area would be mitigated before reaching surrounding communities, with the exception of occasional major events. The activities generated by the park will not violate the noise control ordinance established by Howard County. If necessary, earth-berms may be considered by the consultant.

## 12. Volunteers

The 12<sup>th</sup> area of concern was how volunteers can be used at Blandair. Although this is not an issue that the Blandair Planning Committee addressed, the development of Blandair Regional Park will provide many volunteer opportunities in environmental and historic education, active and passive recreation, and even has the potential for volunteer gardening and/or agricultural activities. The Department of Recreation and Parks has a very active volunteer program that is easily accessible to the citizens of Howard County.

## 13. Environmental and other Regulations

A series of questions was posed regarding environmental issues. The Department of Recreation and Parks can resolve most of these questions by stating that, as with all park development projects, the County must comply with all State and local regulations regarding wetland, forest cover, buffers, wildlife, grading, vegetation, steep slopes, soils, ADA, noise, storm water management (quality and quantity), hazardous contamination, building and use setbacks, and any other regulations that may apply. All park plans must be submitted to the County's Subdivision Review Committee to be reviewed by: Soil Conservation Service, Fire Department, Police Department, Health Department, Department of Planning and Zoning, Traffic Engineering, **Planning Board**, Real Estate Services and the State Highway Administration.