

## **Attachment 4a: Letter from Dissenting Fort Ward Advisory Group Members**

### **Outstanding Concerns with the Final Draft Management Plan for Fort Ward Park and Museum**

**Oakland Baptist Church**

**Seminary Civic Association**

**Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society, Inc.**

**September 9, 2014**

On August 13, 2014 the Fort Ward Park and Museum Advisory Group appointed by the City Manager met to discuss the Draft Management Plan for the area, including summary work done by Lardner/ Klein Landscape Architects, the History Report done by Dr. Moon, and the Drainage Plan done by the URS Corporation. At the meetings end the Council Chair made a motion to approve the documents and send them forward for further commission and public review and eventual review and approval by the City Council. A vote was taken and the motion carried 6 to 3 in favor of the action.

Voting against the motion was the Oakland Baptist Church, Seminary Civic Association and the Fort Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society, Inc. The following report has been prepared at the urging of the Advisory Group and the Directors of the City of Alexandria Office of Historic Alexandria and the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities. It outlines the concerns of the three organizations that voted against the motion and is intended to be included in the packet to be presented at the September 10, 2014 public meeting on the Draft Management Plan.

It is important to note that the concerns that are described in the following sections are ones that we raised initially at the March 18, 2009 public meeting on Fort Ward Park and throughout the advisory group process. As you may recall the most important concerns that we identified at that meeting were:

- \* Find the graves and burial areas within the historic park and treat these sacred places with respect;
- \* Stop the water running off parkland from entering the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery and damaging graves and gravestones;
- \* Involve the community, early and throughout the entire process, in the history and interpretation of the story of African American families who lived at the Fort before the creation of the park.

These concerns have been shared with the advisory group members, city department heads and local elected officials throughout the five years we have been working with the city. Frankly our concerns have not changed since day-one and we have voiced them throughout the process.

The major reasons we voted against approving the Draft Management Plan for Fort Ward Park and Museum are:

1. The Draft Plan was to include the Drainage Plan and History Report. These documents were not provided to our advisory group members with adequate time to review them before the vote. We were unwilling to approve documents we did not review.
2. The History Report that was acted on at the August meeting was not the final draft document that was prepared by the consultant for the Office of Historic Alexandria. Further, the final draft document was not provided to descendant family members of Fort Ward or our advisory group members with adequate time to review them before the vote.
3. The History Report did not include any of the oral history interview information about the location of graves and the removal of grave stones from descendant family members of Fort Ward and past and current employees of the City of Alexandria. These interviews, which were promised to be done by the Director of the Office of Historic Alexandria, have, or are likely to have, important information on the location of family graves within the park.

Current and former employees of the city, as well as descendant family members, have first-hand knowledge that can be used to more accurately complete the final draft management plan. This information, if included, would provide important facts that have been omitted by city researchers.

4. The History Report was done contrary to the promises made by the Director of the Office of Historic Alexandria with regard to the involvement of the descendant family members. We were told by city managers that this was our story to tell. The draft report was prepared by a consultant with questionable expertise in African American history and without public notice and early and frequent input from family members.

5. The Draft Drainage Report does not address the illegal actions taken by the City of Alexandria, to modify the use and condition of the park's maintenance yard uphill and next to the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery, that have created runoff problems. The proposed solution to water running off of parkland into the cemetery is to add soil and rock on top of, and adjacent to, known and likely graves despite the concerns of descendant family members, the Seminary community, and leaders of the Oakland Baptist Church. The solution does not address water flowing through the gravel, placed without permits or public notice, in the maintenance yard and into the cemetery.

The report's solution for managing water flowing through the ravine between the Short's property and the cemetery does not recognize or respect the graves that have been reported in this area. Unfortunately the report seems to embrace the idea that city leaders consider that it is acceptable to further bury family graves with soil and rock as a way to protect and honor them.

6. The draft final plan's proposal for additional archaeology relies on the Office of Historic Alexandria, or their consultants, to determine in advance of development decisions whether or not there are graves or historical, cultural or archaeological resources present. This is the same approach that was used in the past and has resulted in the destruction, degradation and disrespect of African American graves and artifacts from the Fort community. Unfortunately over the last seven years that this effort has been underway leaders of the Office of Historic Alexandria have not repaired or built up trust with the descendant families, Seminary community and church leaders to be able to return to a status-quo approach. In fact recent comments about the treatment

of graves within the park have further eroded trust that was severely damaged by the past approval of illegal activities within the park's maintenance yard.

7. The Memorandum of Understanding, between those city departments that have responsibility for management, use and development of Fort Ward Park and Museum, was to be included in the Final Draft Management Plan with a section describing the process for research, review, public input and approval of ground-disturbing activities within areas of the park that are known to have, or likely to have, graves. The Memorandum, as described at the meeting, was not included in the final draft.

8. The overall report offers few if any of the recommendations made by the initial advisory group. Rather it relies on a menu of ideas to choose from. Many of the ideas suggested call for additional city-funded consultant studies to further review and determine actions for the management, use and development of Fort Ward.

9. The report does not provide the families of those buried in the park with the opportunity to determine the way family graves will be protected from visitor use, maintained, and identified. It appears that these burial areas are to be managed as recreation areas rather than a cemetery or historic area. Discussions with the leaders of the Office of Historic Alexandria indicate that the city has acquired and would like to use headstones that are not consistent with the wishes of family members.

In addition, many descendant family members and leaders of the Oakland Baptist Church believe that known family graves, within the park, are not being protected or managed by the city. The Jackson family burial area and the Old Grave Yard are poorly maintained, not protected from recreation use, need to be fenced and have signs posted urging respect for these places. It is strongly contended by the descendant families, community and leaders of the Oakland Baptist Church that The Old Grave Yard was originally part of the Oakland Baptist Church Cemetery before the city revised the cemetery boundary as part of a trade of lands. This sacred area, which contains many graves, should be incorporated back into the cemetery so that it will receive protection.

10. The draft report makes no mention of the events, problems and concerns that led City Council to take action to improve the city's management, protection and use of Fort Ward Park. The report does not acknowledge any of the past and more recent actions that city departments have taken that show a disregard to past and current African Americans with family ties to the park and cemetery.

In summary, the desire of the advisory group leader to move the incomplete draft final management plan forward the action to vote on the approval of the plan was premature. Despite the public and private money, time and effort that have gone into preparing these documents they still need revision before a management plan is ready to present to the City Council.

We request that we be given the opportunity to briefly present our concerns at the public meeting on September 10, 2014. Should you have questions please contact Frances Colbert Terrell at (703)379-9511.

Sincerely,

Lena Rainey, Oakland Baptist Church

Frances Colbert Terrell, Seminary Civic Association

Adrienne Terrell Washington, Ft. Ward and Seminary African American Descendants Society,