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# THE LELAND COMMUNITY RECREATION CENTER

By far the most ambitious and creative long-term project ever undertaken by the Town of Chevy Chase was the financing and construction of the Leland Community Recreation Center. The center, which opened in the spring of 1989, incorporates a Montgomery County recreation center, the offices of the Town of Chevy Chase, a child care facility, an outdoor park, and a sizeable parking area. This cooperative project among the town, the county, and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission may appear simple and straightforward, but the story of its evolution could not be more complex.

The decision to close Leland Junior High School in 1981 by the Montgomery County Board of Education was very upsetting for our community. Long before appeals against that decision proved unsuccessful, townspeople began to wonder about the future for this closed school site. The 3.7 acres, bounded by Elm Street, Willow Lane, 44th Street, and Oakridge Lane, had been in continuous use for a school since their original dedication by the developers of the subdivision. Monroe and R.B. Warren gave this land, 22 lots in their new "Leland Community," to the County Board of Education. The first Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School was built there in 1928. The building became a junior high in 1936, and a completely new junior high building was substituted for the old one in 1963. For almost 60 years, neighboring residents had been hosts to school buses, school children, and school activities. Now the school was closing and the Board of Education would transfer ownership of the site to Montgomery County. On Elm Street, Willow, 44th, and Oakridge, there was particular concern about its future.

## First Reactions

Members of the Town Council asked Dallas Read, a resident of Elm Street, to do a study into possible re-uses which would be compatible with the neighborhood. Mrs. Read recommended a mixed-use facility, similar to the Torpedo Factory in Alexandria, to house working artists, classes for the community, and offices for some nonprofit organizations. This proposal was applauded by some and strongly opposed by others. Some residents feared that such a facility would have a negative impact on the single-family residential zoning and increase commercial intrusion and traffic.

In 1982, a group was organized by Marie and Ken Gaarder and others to support some kind of mixed use in a renovated building. This group hoped to put together a multi-service community center that would have mostly public users but would not rule out the possibility of participation by private nonprofit organizations. The group eventually incorporated with the legal help of Roger and Cathy Titus, and named themselves the Leland Community Center Corporation.

At this time, the process for disposal of closed school properties in the county was essentially in the hands of the County Executive, with the concurrence, if money was spent, of the County Council. There was no requirement for citizen input about re-use.

County officials began to talk to possible tenants for the Leland building. Among the applicants were commercial and biomedical research entities. Townspeople were alarmed that the county might accept a "commercial" tenant. The County Attorney published an opinion that stated that since the county itself was the owner of closed school properties and the county was a "permitted use" in any zone, then a tenant, whether or not of the type allowed in the zoning, could lease a facility and be "allowed" under the county's "permitted zoning." The town, of course, opposed this interpretation.

Members of the Leland Community Center group circulated information about the county's activities and aroused the sentiment of townspeople against such action. They gathered petitions to press the Town Council to take a more aggressive role in the process of deciding what was to happen to the Leland site.

## A Key Election

Issues in the town election in 1982 focused on the Leland re-use situation. A town survey about this time showed that 63 percent of those responding favored the town itself taking control of the site. Councilwoman Carol Blum was one of the leaders of the Leland Corporation, and Councilwoman Anne Bushart was also sympathetic to the group's position. Another member of the Leland group, Jane Lawton, ran for the Town Council, campaigning that the council should become more directly involved in the re-use issues, and was elected. The council began to engage itself more deeply in the county's process. It hired a zoning attorney to rebut the County Attorney's opinion with regard to allowable

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uses of closed schools. After further consideration, the County Attorney backed away from his previous position and amended his opinion. His second memo "revised" the prior opinion, stating that "a private tenant leasing a surplus school site as a private user must comply with the provisions of Montgomery County's Zoning Ordinance."

In August 1982, the school closure became final, and by this time the Board of Education had closed 40 schools in the down-county area. The County Council still wanted a formal role in the re-use process, and began to look at legislation and administrative procedures that might give it more power.

In the meantime, within the Town of Chevy Chase, several other groups formed and began to lobby the Town Council to support their proposals for re-use of the site. One that had considerable support was the Oakridge Housing Corporation (Oakridge Lane Associates). This corporation supported restoring the land to its original lots for single-family housing or cluster housing. Another was an idea put forth by Elm Street resident Jack Kimball to convert the existing building to housing for the elderly. Still others favored renovating the school building and renting it to a private school. Because of the town's need for open space, a large number of residents supported clearing the site completely for outdoor recreation uses and green space.

## The Town Becomes Involved

In the summer of 1982, Town Council Chairman Haig Ellian sent a letter to County Executive Charles Gilchrist on behalf of the Town Council, advising him that "the town would like to acquire the Leland site." This gave weight to those who supported a "public use" above all other uses. The council made it clear that it was only interested in public uses which were "compatible" with the surrounding neighborhood and that it was willing to consider a use in cooperation with the county.

The Town Council met with the County Executive and representatives of all the agencies associated with the disposal of closed-school sites. This meeting took place in the fall of 1982 and was very important because it formally established the town's involvement in the re-use decision for Leland. One of the stumbling blocks from the county's viewpoint was that Leland had an outstanding debt of over \$500,000, since the public bonds for its construction had not yet been paid off. It was clear that if the town acquired the site, it would have to start its ownership with full repayment of that debt to the state.

To ascertain more clearly what the true cost of acquisition might be, the Town Council appointed a task force to evaluate the condition of the building and the cost of its renovation or demolition. This committee included Council Chairman Bill Wildhack and an architect, a builder, and a financial adviser who were residents of the town. The task force members visited the site and made some estimates about renovation. They obtained information about code enforcement requirements for a renovated building and sought a professional estimate for the demolition. This information was presented to the Town Council.

## The Leland Committee

At the same time, the Town Council officially appointed a working committee of townspeople to investigate the possibilities for the Leland site and make a recommendation to the council. Resident Joan Berman chaired the committee, and Jane Lawton served as the council liaison. The new Town Leland Committee evaluated the findings of the task force and the work of others who supported various ideas for the site, and interviewed many possible users. The members also met with various county agencies to determine what the status of the property was from the county's point of view, and whether there were county needs to be met.

In October 1983, this committee formally recommended to the Town Council that the council should seek to acquire the property to provide outdoor recreation facilities with the possibility of adding a building with town offices and meeting rooms in the future. This was a fully-developed proposal supported by cost data and implementation plans. It was adopted by the Town Council and formally presented to the County Executive for response.

The next month, the Town Council sent a letter to the chairman of the Interagency Committee on Closed Schools for Montgomery County, setting forth the position of the town in seeking "support in a cooperative effort" in finding an appropriate future use of the site. It noted that the town has "no parks or playing fields except for the black top and small field at the Chevy Chase Elementary School," and that the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission "has declared our area badly in need of open space."

In April 1984, the Town Council passed legislation to amend the Town Charter to increase borrowing authority in hopes that the County Executive would move quickly to accept the town's offer. It also sent a letter to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning

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Commission requesting "Open Space" money for the project and pledging \$40,000 in matching funds from the town's budget.

Shortly after the circulation in the county of the town's proposal, County Councilman David Scull introduced new "closed school" legislation. This provided that the County Council could recommend new zoning for closed school sites—including all residential, some commercial, some industrial, and "special exception" uses—without having to go through the normally-required rezoning process. This legislation, adopted in March 1984, gave the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, as planning advisors, and the County Council new roles in all school re-use decisions. The legislation was not aimed at Leland alone, but would give the County Council authority in the disposal of the sites of about 40 recently-closed schools.

The Town's Leland Committee quickly converted itself to a lobbying group and requested a waiver for the town from this new process, since negotiations were already in progress to acquire the Leland site. Planning Commission Chairman Norman Christeller and County Executive Charles Gilchrist both supported the town's request for this waiver, and the Leland site was specifically exempted from the new legislation, as were several other schools with re-use contracts in progress. Much later, this legislation was ruled to be illegal because it effectively bypassed county zoning requirements.

## A County Task Force

In spite of the waiver, the County Executive now had to contend politically with the interest of the County Council in these re-use matters. Therefore, in early 1984, he appointed a county task force to make a recommendation about the best re-use for the Leland site. This task force included two representatives from the Town Council, staff of the County Department of Recreation, the Interagency Coordinating Committee, the Board of Education, the County Council, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, and a top official of the County Executive's office. At the request of the Town Council, the Town's Leland Committee could also send representatives. This county task force met about every two weeks for a year and was charged with the goal of determining the best possible re-use for the Leland site, with or without the existing building. They were also to look at the possibility of "downsizing" the existing building.

The Town's Leland Committee continued working with and reporting to the town during this time. It had new co-chairs, Jean Linehan and Cathy Wolf, both of whom served on the now expanded county re-use task force, as did Leland Committee members Carey Rivers, John Gross, and Jack Kimball.

## Choices

After six months of investigating and information gathering, the task force came up with fully-developed alternatives and compared their cost effectiveness. It also considered what were the highest needs for county services in the down-county area. In general, the alternatives included: renovating the existing building for a mixed use, with an emphasis on providing much-needed recreational programming; renovating the existing facility for housing; "downsizing" the existing building and constructing a new facility for recreational programming, town offices, child care, and a park; or taking down the existing building and providing open space and a park.

One crucial consideration in evaluating these proposals was the cost of upgrading the existing building to meet fire and building codes if it were to be used by persons of all ages for a variety of activities. The cost of renovation to accommodate a "mixed use" was much higher than anticipated and higher than the cost of demolishing the school and building a new center. And that was obvious long before asbestos was ruled to be a hazard, adding the cost of its removal. Needless to say, the least expensive alternative was use of the site as a park.

In October 1984, the Leland Site Re-use Task Force unanimously recommended that the site should be developed for a new down-county recreation center, and that the old building should be replaced with a new smaller facility especially designed for recreation, town offices, and child care. The outdoor space would be developed to provide a park and off-street parking.

The findings and recommendations of the task force were presented to the County Executive and County Council and to the town residents, who were enthusiastic. Data gathered by the county agency representatives on the task force strengthened the proposal. The down-county area of 100,000 citizens had a severe deficiency in recreational programming and open space. The only county facility, the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Recreation Center on Walsh Street, was 8,000 square feet, had no regulation-sized gym, no parking, no outdoor space, and no meeting room, and was itself in need of over

\$300,000 in renovations. In recent years, this center had had to limit itself to senior citizen programming because of its physical limitations. The census data showed this was an area of young families as well as older residents, and there was a desperate need for community services, especially child care. The proposed center could provide those services and would return a bit of green space as well.

Task force members were enthusiastic; the County Executive was supportive; and the Park and Planning Commission was eager to embrace the proposal. Other surrounding communities, whose residents would benefit from a recreation center, were supportive. The County Council, however, was slow to act.

This was one of those times when it seemed that County Council members were very reluctant to spend for services in the “affluent” down-county area of Bethesda-Chevy Chase. County officials did not want to increase their debt for fear of losing their AAA bond rating. But the proposal to use the Walsh Street Center renovation money for the design of a new center instead had merit. Then an unexpected wrinkle appeared.

## Setback

A well-established private school in Northwest Washington, Immaculata, had been sold by an order of nuns to provide for their retirement, and was to be closed. Parents were determined to keep the school alive. And representatives, with the support of town residents who had children at the school, approached the county and the town asking to lease the Leland building.

Task force members were surprised and appalled when the County Council scheduled public hearings on this request without first responding to the task force’s

unanimous proposal for a new recreation center. The Town Council, also, was in a precarious middle position. Obviously, the private school option was a “compatible” one for the neighborhood and was supported by some townspeople, among whom were parents of students at Immaculata. However, years had been given to the effort to make this site a public resource for everyone. The need for recreation and parkland was critical. To complicate the matter, with the need to stabilize the public schools, many were concerned that an additional neighborhood private school would draw children from nearby Chevy Chase Elementary and B-CC High School.

In addition to these factors, the representatives for Immaculata, who understandably needed a new location, did not seem to have a realistic picture of what it would cost to bring Leland up to code. The building itself had deteriorated badly, and the school’s financial proposal seemed unrealistic. Therefore, the Town Council continued to support the public use alternative in its negotiations with the county.

County Council members were divided on the issue. They, too, were heavily lobbied by friends of Immaculata and were eager to help the school relocate in Montgomery County. They were also interested in the possibility of finding a tenant, rather than funding demolition and a new center. The County Council scheduled hearings to consider all these things.

## A New Idea and More

The Town Council Chairman, Bill Wildhack, a mortgage banker by profession, had a new idea to bolster the recreation center proposal. Why couldn’t the town pay for the construction of a new center under its own bonding authority and arrange a long-term agreement



*Leland Community Recreation Center*

PHOTO BY LAURA RIVERS

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where the county repaid the town? This would enable the county to obtain a new facility without increasing its bonded indebtedness. The other members of the Town Council agreed and developed testimony to make this offer at the hearing.

At the County Council hearing, the task force urged the county to consider its proposal seriously and the representatives from Immaculata also presented their request. The town made its financing offer formally and upon hearing it, Councilman Scull, who was not an advocate of the private school option, moved that the Council Council accept the re-use task force proposal for a new recreation center, accept the town's offer to finance construction, and help Immaculata find another location in the county. The County Council approved the motion and finally, the new recreation center was on its way!

This creative arrangement took months to negotiate and implement. There were three equal partners: the county, the town, and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. First, the county had to acquire title to the Leland site from the state. The construction bonds had by now been paid off by the county.

The Park and Planning Commission, which owned the Walsh Street site, would "swap properties" with the county, which owned the Leland site. In the agreement, the Leland site would become a park owned by M-NCPPC; the town would own the facility during construction and would lease the site from the M-NCPPC for \$1 a year; and the county would lease the facility from the town for the life of the bonds at a price that would pay their cost. The next two months were the project's "legal phase." A "memo of understanding," lease, sublease, and management and rental agreements were negotiated by attorneys for all sides.

The Town Council, in the meantime, began the process required for the town to float public bonds. The Leland Committee presented the appropriate information to town residents. The council sent official notifications. And the public vote on the bond issue for the Leland Recreation Center was held in the Ohio Room of the National 4-H Center on June 26, 1985.

The vote was overwhelming in favor of the bond issue—178 yes to 4 no. The Town Council chairman and treasurer traveled with bond legal counsel to New York and presented the town's request for its first-ever bond rating, which turned out to be AA from Moody's and A+ from Standard and Poor's. A bond consultant helped market the issue, and all five members of the Council, Bill Wildhack, Jane Lawton, Carol Blum, Carey Rivers,

and Mier Wolf, traveled to New York City for the official release of the bonds.

## Designs

In November 1985, the county published a request for proposal (RFP) for the design of the new center. Over 70 architects responded to the RFP; five were interviewed; and one was selected. The design phase began, and the county scheduled a formal "charrette" for ideas for the new facility. The design was presented to the town residents in preliminary and final form in the spring and summer of 1986. The legal agreements for the construction phase of the project—management contract, indemnification, and construction agreements—were negotiated. The Town Traffic Committee looked at ways to amend the evening rush hour traffic plan to allow access to the center from the west. The final design was presented to the Park and Planning Commission and to the County Council. The input of residents was considered, and some changes were made, with final presentations in September at a town meeting and in December at a meeting of the Leland Advisory Board, a new county board to advise the Recreation Department on the center.

Early in 1987, the project was put out for bid to contractors. The town requested that the center be officially named the Leland Community Recreation Center to commemorate the original Leland Community. The County Executive agreed and signed documents to that effect. The official groundbreaking ceremony was held on October 17, 1987—the first Community Service Day in the county—and a parade of county officials blessed the project. All three partners were well represented and the Town Council and the Leland Committee were given shovels to break the ground.

## Construction

The demolition of the old building, clearing of the site, and actual construction began in late 1987 and continued through the spring of 1989. The Town Council, the town manager, and town residents serving on various committees continued to participate in a variety of ways. There were numerous delays and problems to be solved during construction.

To expedite completion, the town and the Park and Planning Commission separately bid out the landscaping of the site and the installation of the playground areas, which were paid out of "Open Space" funds matched by town monies. Construction delays pre-



*Uprooted tree on Blackthorn Street was typical of the damage done by the June 14, 1989 storm.*  
PHOTO, POTOMAC ELECTRIC POWER COMPANY

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vented the 1989 Annual Town Meeting from being held in the new facility, and the grand opening celebration was rescheduled from the planned date of May 6 to June 17, 1989. A special sneak preview party for town residents only was planned for Friday, June 16.

On Wednesday, June 14, the last construction progress meeting was held, and those in attendance breathed a sigh of relief that the building, the landscaping, and the biggest part of the playground were complete. Workers were frenetically finishing the floors, touching up the paint, hanging the fixtures, and trying to locate the flooring for the weight room which was still in transit. Over 600 residents had accepted the invitation to the Sneak Preview.

## A Stormy Victory

At 4:35 p.m. on Wednesday, June 14, the skies turned a darker shade of gray and green with an approaching storm. The power cut off, children rushed inside, and within ten minutes the town had experienced the most devastating storm in its history. It was classified by the National Weather Service as a #5 storm (with #6 being the most destructive.) Every street in town was blocked by fallen trees and debris. Roofs and cars were crushed with power lines entangled and hanging like spaghetti above the sidewalks. Seventy town trees, many over 100 years old, were down completely, and another 150 severely damaged. Hundreds of private trees were lost. The town immediately began a "disaster cleanup" with scores of PEPCO contractors, private contractors, and the town's contractors and sub-contractors working

long hours with saws and cranes and loaders to clear the streets and power lines. A second storm hit the area on June 15, compounding the problems of homeowners. Remarkably, on Thursday morning the Leland Center was just about the only building in town with power. The air conditioning was running smoothly, the lights were burning brightly, and the ice maker was churning away. The decision was made to proceed with the party plans.

On Friday night, about 600 residents gathered for the preview opening of the new Leland Community Recreation Center against a backdrop of uprooted trees, closed roads, and damaged homes. Many residents had worked in their debris-strewn yards for two long days, and the Leland Center was a welcome respite from the storm. The food was delicious, warm, and plentiful, the band was lively, and the historical photo display reminded us of how far our small town had come in just over 71 years. The joy of the center's completion was marred by the storm's destruction, but residents were pleased to open the center at last, and truly grateful that not one person was injured or killed in this most destructive local storm of our century. The center truly embodied our town's spirit of unity in its first use.

The official opening ceremonies were held on Saturday morning, June 17, 1989, and were well attended by a larger Bethesda-Chevy Chase community and many of the county's dignitaries. Clowns, face-painters, celebrity volleyball, and demonstrations in the weight room, the gym, and on the tennis courts added to the success of the day. By nightfall on Saturday, the town's homes again were silent and dark but the lights at the Leland Community Recreation Center burned brightly.

*Jane Lawton*