

## **Case Statement for the Purchase of the Surplus BCC Land**

“Our local parks are not perks - they are essential infrastructure for healthy, connected, equitable, empowered communities.” (Trust for Public Land July 2020)

We are at a critical point in the history of our community. The Baltimore Country Club (BCC) has decided that they must sell the 20 acres of “surplus land” left over from their sale of Cross Keys to Jim Rouse. The remaining golf course property (bounded by Hillside Road, Falls Road and Edgevale Road) will be up for sale this spring. This sale will not include the club house located at the top of the hill on Club Road, or the parking lots.

In the late 1800s, the country club was established to create community recreational space for the surrounding residents. Today, a limited number of neighborhood residents belong to the Club, yet the demand for community recreational space and environmental stewardship has never been more important or more necessary. If the community is to shape the future of this portion of our community and the city, it must act now.

Community has never been more important. As the world seems more and more in chaos, our community and our sense of place are paramount. This community was one of the first in the country to be planned, instead of built as demand required. It seems as if it were created for times such as we are experiencing in 2020-2021. Quarantining has people spending more time outdoors, at home and in the surrounding neighborhood, thinking more about where we live and about our community. The roads wind, and we slow down. Our sidewalks and paths invite us to wander and enjoy occasional conversations with others out walking. The green verges along the streets and triangles at many intersections, so typical of Olmsted communities, keep us seeing trees and green instead of cement and signs.

One hundred years ago, the sons of Frederick Law Olmsted, the founder of American landscape architecture, had a vision for this community, one that was executed to the smallest physical detail, and is now studied by urban planners around the world. Now, it is our turn to shape this community for the next 100 years.

While the Olmsteds’ visions for the landscape and hardscape were inspirational, the vision of the developer, the Roland Park Company, of who would live here, was exclusive and inequitable. Our community was started with informal, but effective, limitations on who could live here, and purposely excluded minorities. Fortunately, all races and religions live here now, even though this community is not as diverse yet as we hope it will become. Parks are the most democratic space, welcoming all people regardless of race or religion and this park will be open to the entire City.

This opportunity to create a new park, in the style of Olmsteds, will shape the future of the community. While this park will have limited formal programming, it will change our

community. Imagine the Druid Hill Park neighborhood without the park. Patterson Park without the Park. Guilford without Sherwood Gardens. Imagine picnics and outdoor concerts, grandparents taking their grandchildren to the playground. If we can imagine a new future for this space, we can make it so.

### **Background**

Ever since Baltimore Country Club closed its golf course in the 1960s, the Roland Park neighborhood and the adjoining communities have been concerned about the future of the 20 acres of open space. Fortunately, many BCC members lived in Roland Park, and respected the value of open space in this community. They staved off a vote to sell it until early 2008, when Keswick Corporation made a handsome offer. The offer, however, was contingent on securing the approval of a zoning change in the form of a Planned Urban Development (PUD) variance. In protest, over 750 Roland Park community members attended a September 2008 meeting to show support for keeping the space open, with hundreds more voicing support through letter campaigns, and private calls to public officials. Because of strong advocacy, the City denied the change in zoning. Had our neighborhood advocacy failed, the BCC acreage would now be home to a building complex the size of Raven's Stadium.

The effort to stop the Keswick purchase and development of the land made vivid two points: (1) the remarkable civic pride and community awareness of this area and (2) the vulnerability of the BCC property. Almost immediately, discussions began about what the community should do next. Roland Park and its neighbors decided to create a master plan, a blueprint for the future of the community.

During 2009 and 2010, with the support and input of 15 neighborhoods, open community-wide meetings to solicit and discuss ideas; outreach meetings with educational institutions and business owners; and consultation from professionals in parks, land preservation, streetscapes, transportation and architecture, the Greater Roland Park Master Plan (GRPMP) was drafted. One hundred and forty pages long, the plan addressed the vision for the future in all areas. This was historic not only because of its all-volunteer effort, but also because of the vision created for the future of the Greater Roland Park area.

In the 2011 Greater Roland Park Master Plan, the purchase of the BCC land and the creation of a public park were of highest priority. Preliminary funds were raised and offers were made to the Club, but they were rejected.

### **Future**

With an understanding of the past, we must look forward to what this land can create for this area and for the entire City. The plans for the park are to create an Olmsted-like park, which would include walking paths, open scenic park space, a playground, a community garden, an open-air amphitheater, and playing fields.

The purchase of the BCC land will give the community a public green space to call our own. It will be a place to meet, to exercise, to celebrate, to get away, a place to bring out-of-town guests and to see neighbors. In this global pandemic, community public spaces have never been more valued or more necessary. This is a once in a generation opportunity to create a park for the benefit of the entire city in one of its most engaged communities. The park will be accessible by several public transit options, including the light rail and the bus lines on Falls Road and Roland Avenue.

What does it mean to create a park in the Olmsted style? The Olmsted firm played a vital role in creating the community we enjoy today. As one of the most famous landscape architecture firms in the world, its philosophy was that public spaces were democratic places. Think of New York's Central Park, one of the country's first public parks.

In Roland Park, the Olmsteds created pocket parks and larger greenspaces, such as Centennial Park on University Parkway. A network of sidewalks and footpaths connect neighbors to one another, to the business blocks, schools, houses of worship, public transportation and greenspace. Winding pathways open up to surprising views. Roadways follow the natural topography of the land and further the beneficial impact of greenspace.

The central view of Hillside Park, looking up at the BCC building, will be preserved in this style. Different outdoor "rooms" will be used for walking, playing ball, running and having fun. Think of the different parts of Central Park and then scale it down to 20 acres. The most successful parks are those with three generations enjoying them, so we will work with that core principle in mind. There will be benches for resting as well as a playground for the youngest.

The purchase of this property allows the community to create additional field space for Poly/Western, for the Roland Park Baseball League, and potentially for paid rentals for other schools or athletic leagues for whom space is always an issue. If the Roland Park community pool ever needed to return the space to Friends School, this area would be a possible location. None of these options is set in stone but they give the community choices.

While the recreational uses are exciting and of highest priority, it is important to remember that if the community purchases this property, the land can be put in a conservation easement. There would be no development other than passive recreational uses, **forever**. Keeping open greenspace is a priority in the fight against climate change. Maintaining this open area is a concrete way we, as a community, can fight for our beleaguered planet. Keeping the trees, the stream, the fox dens, and the land free from the approximately 50 houses that could be built on it, is important to being good stewards of the area we call home.

The overall campaign is \$8 million dollars. Based on a recent purchase by Boys Latin, we believe the price for the land will be between \$5 and \$6 million dollars. We have budgeted \$1 million dollars for the maintenance endowment and \$1 million for the park hardscape improvements. While there is public funding for open space projects, we do not have the luxury of time for the initial purchase dollars.

The Roland Park Community Foundation (RPCF) is a non-profit 501c(3) organization established in 1986 to preserve, maintain and improve the parks, streams, squares, trees, and other green spaces in our community. The mission is to benefit present and future generations of residents and to stay true to the Olmsteds' vision for this community.

The RPCF is a small, nimble non-profit with a board of between 9 and 15 members. This small group of residents has been able to harness the energy of the community and support the restoration of the library and the firehouse. In 2018, it worked with the 15 neighborhoods adjacent to the Stony Run to create a Strategic Plan for all to follow.

Most recently, it led the multi-neighborhood effort to stabilize the Roland Water Tower. Construction began in October 2020 and should be complete in June 2021. The creation of a community park at the base of the Tower will begin after construction. We have set an example for other communities in Baltimore, and they have followed our lead. In all of those cases, while some public funding was necessary, private funds were a requirement to get the projects started. After our example, scores of libraries and firehouses have been restored in the City. The time is now to set the example for what a community can do for its open spaces.

Our community again has a unique opportunity. That is to preserve and sustain our uncommon community landscape and to create a model for urban neighborhoods across Baltimore to protect open space essential to the well-being of citizens. The goal is to preserve and enhance 20 urban acres for parks, woods, native plants, watershed, paths and meadows, and to integrate our urban landscape planned over 100 years ago by the Olmsteds as part of an unprecedented blueprint for community wellness.

Can Roland Park raise the money for something as amorphous as community enhancement? Other campaigns raise money for schools, hospitals, and other important institutions, but this campaign asks of its residents: what value is open space? People give fortunes to create and preserve great buildings, why not do the same with a beautiful open space. Why not create a living legacy for future generations just as one was created for us? What is possible when we come together for a common purpose?

#