

COMMENTARY

A modest proposal for Newark's central park

To The Editor
From Gerald Kauffman Jr.

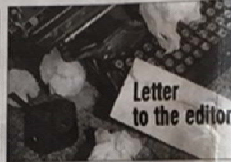
As a Newark taxpayer and resident of the same watershed that includes the Newark Country Club, I have been following the applicant's proposal to the City Planning Commission to convert the golf course to a development with 271 homes on 120 acres.

The Newark Country Club property is unique in Newark because it is the only interior open space parcel within the City proper that straddles two major watersheds - the Christina River and White Clay Creek. There are three streams on the parcel: one that flows west through the ponds to the Upper Christina River and the other two that flow east through the valley before joining and continuing through the University of Delaware before entering White Clay Creek. The stream along the easterly property line - Blue Hen

Creek - was designated by the President and Congress as part of the White Clay Creek National Wild and Scenic River watershed. There are fragile steep slopes (greater than 15 percent), wetlands, wooded areas, and mature tree specimens on the site. In its current green state, the parcel protects open space in two different watersheds.

I have reviewed the proposed tract-like subdivision plan and find it could use refinement to bring it in synch with modern conservation design criteria. The current plan is a remnant of a 1960's era design philosophy that maximizes lot yield at the expense of natural resources on the site.

I feel the plan could be improved substantially with a more balanced approach using conservation design and low impact development techniques. First the three fingerlike stream systems and accompanying buffers and wetland systems should be delineated



and protected from their headwaters to the downstream property line. The steep slopes, wooded areas, flower beds, grass lands, and mature tree lines that line each fairway should be preserved. A city park similar to the parks in the Fairfield and West Branch neighborhoods could be fitted into the open space. Then a new layout could be fitted in between these protected areas providing homes with a bucolic view on the hilltops over looking the green valleys of the Christina and White Clay Creek tributaries that flow through the property. That would be a sensational neighborhood that balances economic yield without sacrificing all of the environmental resources on the parcel.

It's acknowledged that a creative and conservation-minded new development can provide benefits to residents of Newark. Property values will only increase in the adjoining neighborhoods. New families would replenish the swim clubs and little leagues and soccer teams. A new trail would connect the surrounding neighborhoods. A new neighborhood park would be added to the city's system. The city would accrue more water, sewer and electric revenues. There would be a lot to like if the neighborhood plan is revised to follow a green conservation design approach.

For decades, the members of the Newark Country Club have been good neighbors and careful and considerate custodians of this privately owned open space. As property owners they reserve the right to receive fair market value on the sale of this land. I am hoping that they would con-

sider the following alternatives to land development that would honor their history as stewards of the land and continue the country club's open space legacy for posterity.

When Olmsted and Vaux drew up their 1858 Greensward Plan as a design for New York City's Central Park, they seized a rare chance to design a master planned public park in the middle of Manhattan Island as an urban refuge and green oasis protected in perpetuity. While Nottingham Road is not Fifth Avenue, the country club site poses a similar once in a lifetime opportunity to become Newark's Central Park. Consider sketches envisioning a central park with hiking and jogging trails, ponds, a nine-hole municipal golf course, tree lined arboretum, soccer and softball fields, an outdoor ice skating rink, a sledding hill. Millions of dollars of funding would be needed to acquire the site as public open space. Wishing to explore this opportunity, we have been in touch with several land trust organizations including the Trust for Public Land to determine the potential for advancing funds to acquire this land as public open space.

These are the following options that have not yet been exhausted for open space acquisition at the Newark Country Club:

City of Newark: The city could sponsor a referendum asking its residents to vote on whether they would earmark additional funds to acquire the country club as a central park. In this fashion, several years ago city residents voted by at least a 3 to 1 margin to acquire the 109 acre Koelig Farm for \$8 million as the site of the Newark Reservoir park. The Koelig site, which is about the same size as the country club parcel, was approved by New Castle County Council for more than 200 homes.

State of Delaware: The Delaware General Assembly could vote to acquire the golf course as open space as done a few years ago with the Deerfield Country Club north of Newark in the White Clay Creek valley.

University of Delaware: As the country club is just across New London Road from the Laird Campus, the university may wish to acquire the golf course. Fellow land grant institutions like Rutgers and Penn State Universities have their own golf courses and use them for their agriculture turf grass management, hotel and restaurant management, cross country, varsity golf and alumni development programs.

Land Trust: Entities like the Trust for Public Land are available to assist communities in acquiring open space. I have been in contact with one of these land trusts. In Ocean Township, New Jersey, land trust funds have been used to purchase a 54-acre private golf course for public ownership.

Corporation: Perhaps there is a community minded corporation out there who would wish to acquire all or part of the property on the public's behalf.

Cost Share: A city, state, UD, land trust, and/or corporate partnership could share the costs in acquiring all or part of the golf course as a public park thus reducing each partner's financial commitment.

The movement of the Newark Country Club across the state line to Maryland presents a once in a century opportunity to acquire the land to build Newark's Central Park. I hope this is the enduring legacy of that unique piece of beautiful land.

Gerald J. Kauffman is the president of the Fairfield Watershed Association and the director of the University of Delaware's Water Resources Agency.

