

# County of Fairfax, Virginia

To protect and enrich the quality of life for the people, neighborhoods, and diverse communities of Fairfax County



February 23, 2009

Dear Members of the Fairfax County School Board:

As you know, the Fairfax County Athletic Council (FCAC) is appointed by the Board of Supervisors to provide advice on community athletic issues. As such, we have spent much of the past two years studying the proposal to alter school bell schedules. The Council has hosted members of SLEEP at its meetings, participated on the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Transportation Task Force, and has consulted with the athletic community and county staff regarding potential impacts of the proposal. At its regular meeting on February 18, 2009, **the Athletic Council voted unanimously to oppose any change in the bell schedule due to the negative impact on community use of school facilities, interscholastic sports, and all other after-school activities.** We feel these issues were not adequately addressed by the Transportation Task Force's (TTF) final report. The report indicated that the TTF felt that impacts to community sports would be negligible, despite evidence that had been presented to the contrary. Therefore, I would like to share our reasoning with you.

This month, County Executive Anthony Griffin presented to the Board of Supervisors a statement of potential impacts the bell schedule change could have on county services. While you have received a copy of this report, please allow me to clarify the issues regarding community sports. The Department of Community and Recreation Services (CRS) is responsible for scheduling FCPS gyms and fields, as well as Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA) fields, to approximately 250,000 sports participants each year. As over 180,000 of these participants are youth, the breadth of any impact will be significant.

FCPS facilities are available for CRS to schedule to the community only after high school athletic needs are met. Because most high schools do not have the field or gym space to accommodate all of their teams for daily practices, they must rely on off-campus facilities. Off-campus use is heaviest in the spring, when high schools use more than 70 fields located at other schools and at parks. In the winter, high schools use more than 20 off-campus gyms, mostly located at middle schools. As a result, community use of middle school gyms in the winter (the peak season for gym sport participation) usually starts at 6 or 6:30 p.m.; gyms that do not host high school practices are generally available beginning at 5 p.m. High school use of off-campus fields often ends around 5 p.m., allowing the community adequate time to access the fields; fields not used for practice are available beginning at 4:30 p.m.

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Any community sports league commissioner will quickly tell you that there already is a severe deficit in the quantity of athletic fields and gyms in Fairfax County. The proposed bell schedule, if implemented, will further erode the availability of space for a variety of reasons. First, a later dismissal time, according to FCPS staff, will result in later high school practice times, pushing back the times that community use gains access to facilities. Second, a lack of lighted practice fields, combined with new difficulties completing practices during daylight, will require high schools to use additional off-campus fields and may require additional Saturday practices. Third, interscholastic games may be forced to be staggered over multiple days. (For

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example, instead of playing freshman, junior varsity, and varsity basketball games back-to-back, they may be spread out over three days.) This would reduce on-campus gym space available for practices, increasing high schools' reliance on off-campus facilities.

Later practice times will also likely have a negative impact on community sports groups' willingness to fund synthetic turf fields at high schools, as the amount of time they would receive on such fields would be greatly limited. Similarly, the Board of Supervisors may be more hesitant to direct proffer funds to synthetic turf field development at high schools if limited community use time would be available. While the Athletic Council's primary focus is not on interscholastic sports, we are also quite concerned with the potential impact on varsity athletics, particularly those that rely on off-campus and unlighted facilities not just for practice, but for competition. Golf, cross country, and tennis could all potentially suffer from limited daylight. Golf also risks loss of practice space if FCPS and private clubs providing space are not able to accommodate high school team practices during their peak revenue hours. This scenario is duplicated for swimming and diving. The Park Authority estimates that accommodating high school swim and dive in the later afternoon hours could result in a loss of over \$300,000 in revenue from other pool users. While the Park Authority has pledged to work with FCPS on this issue, the fact remains that any such loss in revenue would have to be recouped somehow. None of the options, which could include increased fees for FCPS to use the facilities, Park Authority service cuts, or increased Park Authority fees for other users, are acceptable.

Start Later for Excellence in Education Proposal (SLEEP) recently released a position paper that addressed many of these issues. Unfortunately, the document indicates a lack of understanding about community athletics in Fairfax County. SLEEP claims that, since elementary schools will dismiss earlier, "some of these fields would be available earlier ([in the afternoon]) for both high school teams and community use." Unfortunately, earlier start times are not a very feasible option for community users. Reliant nearly exclusively on volunteer coaches, most youth sports organizations have great difficulty utilizing facilities earlier than 5 p.m. Even if coaches were available earlier, transportation of participants likely would be a significant issue.

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SLEEP also points to the success of other jurisdictions who have adjusted their bell schedules. However, the differences between Fairfax County and Arlington and Loudoun Counties are greater than simply population. For example, Arlington's youth population (19.9% are under 20 years old) is much smaller than Fairfax's (27.5%) which results in greater demands for youth sports facilities in Fairfax. Additionally, all of Arlington's public high schools have synthetic turf fields, reducing the need for off-campus practice facilities for high school teams. While proponents of the bell change have claimed that synthetic turf could help mitigate the impacts of the change, the reality remains that it will likely cost between 15 and 20 million dollars to convert the stadium fields at the 21 high schools in Fairfax that currently lack synthetic turf. Again, changes in practice and competition schedules could prevent community investment in such fields.

Loudoun County has experienced development at a different pace and during a different time than Fairfax. As a result, schools and parks have been built with today's community use and interscholastic sports needs in mind. More adequate field space is available. The dramatic increase in the numbers of sports played by youth, girls' involvement in sports, and the overall rate of youth participation were evident as Loudoun experienced most of its growth and development. As a result, Loudoun has been able to build schools that incorporate the needs of community use. Middle and high school gym space is essential for community use, but the proposed bell schedule could greatly limit such availability in Fairfax County.

Even proponents of the proposed bell schedule acknowledge that it would bring with it significant impacts. It is incumbent upon the school board to fully understand those impacts and develop plans that would mitigate any negative effects. Through our participation on the TTF and the subsequent reports and

information that has been put forward, we are not convinced this has yet happened. The proposed bell schedule would require wholesale changes for many residents of Fairfax County in how they provide care for their kids, work, and participate in leisure activities. It is particularly appropriate to note that community sports in Fairfax County are nearly entirely volunteer-driven. The coaches, the field schedulers, the team moms—they are volunteers. It is one thing to impose a change on paid staff and coaches, but quite another to ask tens of thousands of volunteers across the county to radically adjust how they do things, with less than six month's notice.

We applaud your initiatives to gain public feedback and are hopeful that it will provide you with substantive information on which to make your decision. I apologize for the length of this letter. People have accused the athletic community of conjecture on this issue, so I want to ensure that you recognize the logic and reasoning behind our decision to oppose this proposal. To paraphrase County Executive Griffin, academic success is a combination of many factors. I know that you agree with me that the vibrant and thriving youth sports community in Fairfax has been a key element in our students' success over the years. I implore you to not jeopardize that and to vote against the proposed bell schedule change.

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Thank you for your time, your consideration, and your ongoing efforts on behalf of our youth and Fairfax County.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mark Meana".

Mark Meana