



January 22, 2021

Dear City Council,

On December 17, 2020, the Olympia Parks, Arts, and Recreation Department (OPARD) and the Olympia School District (OSD) presented to PRAC a proposal to potentially co-locate a new secondary school at the Yelm Highway Community Park. After a lengthy discussion, PRAC voted unanimously to form a subcommittee to more thoroughly explore this proposal in order to provide City Council with its requested recommendation on the matter.

The subcommittee met on December 30 and discussed both potential benefits and impacts of the co-location proposal while also acknowledging the challenge of formulating a recommendation so early in the proposal stage when, understandably, concrete details and clarity on the real benefits of the co-location to the parks community are not yet available.

At PRAC's January 21, 2021, meeting, the subcommittee presented its concerns about the proposal and discussed each one with the committee, OPARD, and OSD staff for nearly two hours. During this time, the committee acknowledged potential benefits of the proposal such as cost sharing, acquiring park property for additional rectangular playing fields and/or park amenities through an OSD land exchange, public access to OSD gym annex and tennis courts at the Yelm Highway Park site, supporting an opportunity for a successful partnership between OSD and OPARD, supporting a potential new paradigm for OSD-OPARD shared-use recreational facilities to benefit our community.

However, PRAC voted (4-Yes, 3-No) to recommend City Council **not** continue exploring a partnership between OSD and OPARD to locate a secondary school on the Yelm Highway Community Park site based on the eight concerns presented below:

- Olympia's need for a community park with four (4) dedicated rectangular fields is well established, the promise for such fields long promised.** Reducing the number of fields owned and managed by OPARD from four (4) to three (3) does not comport with goals and priorities articulated in several long-standing documents published by the City of Olympia. In the 2002 *Parks, Arts & Recreation Plan*, the need for "full-sized, lighted, outdoor, all-weather soccer fields in a developed community park" was identified as a priority. In 2004, the Yelm Highway Community Park was listed as a proposed project to be funded by the voter-approved 3% increase in utility tax (VUT). Both 2010 and 2016 *Parks, Arts & Recreation Plans* stated as a priority the need for a large, community park site for rectangular playing fields. In addition to adding rectangular fields to the Parks system, it is imperative to have all four fields on one park property to support tournament play. In the City's 2014 *Community Park Suitability Assessment*, all the remaining undeveloped parcels large enough for a community park within the City and its Urban Growth Area were assessed, identified, and evaluated. The Yelm Highway

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parcel stood out as the preferred site to purchase for a new community park most suitable for accommodating four rectangular playing fields.

2. **The co-location proposal lacks public support.** A November 2020 Engage Olympia poll revealed that 49.6% of the public was unsupportive of the co-location proposal; 26.6% were supportive, 18.3 percent were neutral and 5.5% needed more information. For nearly two decades, the community has been strongly and consistently supportive of realizing the vision for this community park. To support that vision citizens chose to tax themselves twice--through the VUT in 2004 and Metropolitan Parks District (MPD) in 2016.

3. **The terms of a future joint-use agreement for shared amenities, however generous, are not likely to serve the parks community.** By prioritizing one of the four (4) rectangular fields for OSD school use--as OSD has proposed--the community will face the very problems with availability and scheduling it sought to alleviate through the acquisition of the Yelm Community Park site for four (4) Parks-dedicated fields. Priority for this field will be school athletics not recreational athletic programs. Further, it is not clear how this facility would be managed indifferent to other high school sports stadiums in the Olympia area. Locking gates and restricting access to park amenities does not support inclusivity and equity in our city parks. The committee also has concerns of differential costs for renting the OSD field as compared to the OPARD fields.

4. **The benefits to the parks community are not evident.** The benefit of cost sharing from the co-location proposal has been often stated, but no sense of the scale of costs (for utilities, frontage improvements, site lighting, parking, driveways, traffic improvements, etc.) have been offered to support this. The main benefit to the public of this park is to have four (4) dedicated rectangular fields and other amenities identified as needs since 2003. These needs have been vetted through a significant public process in each preceding park plans. It is difficult to understand what benefit the public will experience by reducing access to the fourth rectangular field and eliminating and/or reducing several planned amenities. The addition of OSD recreational amenities (with restricted use) have not been identified as park needs, and reduces the park by 19 acres. The public strongly supports the vision for its city parks, which includes the acquisition of four (4) rectangular playing fields as documented in the 2003, 2010, and 2016 *Parks, Arts, and Recreation Plans*.

5. **Cost-benefit analysis necessary but likely to cause unacceptable delays.** A cost-benefits analysis, ideally undertaken at OSD expense, will likely be clarifying but may also likely to cause unacceptable delays in project start *despite* the notion/assumption that cost sharing for up-front expenses could expedite and expand the scale of Phase 1 of the project. Without a cost-benefit analysis, there is no clear statement on how costs would align with current schedule of park development. There is no sense of scale of shared costs. It is not clear whether OSD use requirements would lead to Park Dept. "sharing" more than their fair share due to potentially higher costs incurred not only from site development and construction but also from maintenance of added infrastructure and amenities stipulated by OSD. The suggestion that there will be increased safety in the park and

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parking lots from more regular use and “eyes on the park” is a distraction. Upstanding park users as well as perpetrators of vandalism and other illegal behaviors have “eyes on the park.”

6. **Many unanswered questions create considerable uncertainty/risk.** No estimates as to the scale of OSD’s share of costs has been provided. The public has no assurance that any potential monetary benefit to Parks will be realized and will offset potential impacts to this park caused by co-location. Providing answers to many outstanding questions are likely to cause delays in project start and contribute to “fallacy of sunken costs” in which the co-location becomes inevitable due to significant investment of OSD and OPARD time, money, and effort *despite* realization (based on cost-benefit analysis, for instance) that project should perhaps not be pursued.

7. **Park-like aesthetic compromised by co-location.** To accommodate a secondary school and related infrastructure on 19 acres of the park property, the preliminary co-location concept plan show necessary loss of park amenities such as the great lawn, community garden, more than half the picnic shelters, two-thirds of pickleball courts, half the playgrounds, a water feature/sprayground, nature/meadow running loop, vegetated buffers between parking lots and private property to reduce noise/visual disturbance. Co-location requires an increase of parking spaces, from 750 to 1090 spaces, and relocation of the parking lots to the very center of the park instead of the periphery as currently conceptualized. The park-like aesthetic will also be degraded by the increase in vehicular traffic and the addition of on-site driveways to handle this extra traffic flow.

8. **Environmental impacts from co-location could be significant and costly to mitigate.** The increase in size of parking spaces (from 750-1090 spaces), additional driveways, school-building roof, and other impervious surfaces as well as increased vehicular traffic will significantly increase demands on needed storm-water management system. Currently, no concept plan includes a storm-water management pond or other feature to trap runoff and protect 13.5 acres of sensitive wetlands in the park. Accommodating runoff from extra impervious surfaces related to OSD site use is likely to require an increase in the size of the required storm-water feature, further reducing the available area for park use.

Members of PRAC are grateful for the opportunity to provide City Council with this recommendation and rationale for you to consider in your future discussions of this proposal.

Respectfully,

Maria Ruth, Chair  
Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee (PRAC)