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April 7, 2001

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority
5400 Ox Road
Fairfax Station, Virginia 22039

ATTN: Mr. Tod Hafner

Subject: Hemlock Overlook Public Meeting

Dear Mr. Hafner:

This letter summarizes my remarks to the NVRPA public hearing on Hemlock Overlook on 28 February 2001.

In my remarks, I tried to describe a situation that I experienced relative to the operation of the Hemlock facility. This situation does, I believe outline the concerns I and my wife have regarding the programs offered at the facility. We are owners in the Noble Estates subdivision.

One day when leaving for work, I approached Yates Ford Road at the intersection of Evans Ford Road. A small bus, with a private school name on the side, passed in front of me at a quite high rate of speed. I pulled onto Yates Ford behind it and tried to catch up with it. I could not. It moved on in front of me, going fast, and I noticed it went around the "U" curve in the center of the road, and then over the blind hill at the cemetery also in the center of the road. As it approached Kincheloe I again tried to catch up so I could get the license number. The bus did not make a full stop at Kincheloe, and proceeded on East on Yates Ford. I turned North on Kincheloe so did not follow any further.

When arriving at work, I tried to find the school's name in the phone books for the greater Washington, D.C. area, but could not find it. I then called Hemlock Overlook and talked to one of the staff—a senior person. I was told that the bus was driving from the facility to Sandy Run Park with a group of rowing athletes from Long Island, NY. (I believe that is the correct location in the North East). They were on their way to practice. I complained about the excessive speed and dangerous driving on Yates Ford Road, and I was assured that the driver would be counseled upon return that night.

Now, this incident highlights two problems:

1. The first, of course is the dangerous roads in the area of Hemlock Overlook, and the problems of persons driving on those roads who are not familiar with them—especially someone from out of state.
2. The second is the fact that Hemlock was renting out dormitory rooms for out of state persons for activities not in the central mission of the facility. This mission is to provide “out door educational experiences for local schools.” (quoted from page 1-22 of the Draft Supporting Materials for the Development of the Hemlock Overlook Regional Park General Management Plan, February 15, 2001.)

What we now see is a desire by the NVRPA to add new structures to the facility, including a visitor’s center and new office, as well as increased parking for busses and cars. We are told that the office space will replace current space in the existing house and the parking areas will replace current parking space. We were not told that the existing house and parking areas would absolutely be removed. The visitor’s facility would be new and was intended to provide new visitors with information and access about the facility. (Thereby, promising increased traffic on Yates Ford road).

We also see that the facility is being called one of the Regional Parks, while it is in reality an “outdoor learning center,” not a real park as other parks are considered.

We also see that the facility is under the contract management of George Mason University. George Mason does not fund any activities there, nor does the Park authority. Therefore, George Mason must obtain reimbursable costs from users in order to fund and operate their programs.

We also note that the State of Virginia has no plans for improvements or changes to Yates Ford Road for at least 6 years, which should preclude any increased traffic on Yates Ford Road by NVRPA programs. (page 1-7 of Draft Supporting Materials document, above).

As a result, the programs offered by George Mason have grown well beyond the scope and breadth of the intended use of Hemlock Overlook. These programs now include, but may not be limited to: Executive Education and Team Building, room rental for rowing teams from outside the geographical area, soccer camps in the summer, school visits from Maryland and Washington, DC—instead of the local schools intended.

All of this program growth has been accomplished without oversight of the NVRPA, without knowledge of local residents, and without public hearings or impact investigations.

The economics of the George Mason arrangement is misguided. Since George Mason must obtain reimbursable funds for their programs, they have a built-in desire to expand the programs at the site and to increase utilization. This has been done without

considering the conditions of the roads (width of 16-18 feet, curving, hilly) or impacts on the local residents.

I believe the following recommendations are in order:

1. That absolutely no expansion of activities be accomplished at the Hemlock Overlook Outdoor Learning Center.
2. That the facility not be designated a Regional Park, but be retained as an outdoor learning center for local schools.
3. That other George Mason programs be terminated. This would include the Executive training programs and the use of facilities for boarding out-of-area athletes and soccer camps and related activities.
4. That a traffic and road study be conducted to determine use, conditions, and safety impacts on the roads and residents.
5. That the current economic arrangement between NVRPA and George Mason be changed, removing any incentive for George Mason to enter into programs not consistent with the mission of the outdoor learning center and to prohibit any program growth.
6. That tour busses be prohibited from bringing in children to the facility—for their safety and the local resident's safety. Nothing larger than a public school bus should be permitted access on Yates Ford Road. Small, mini-busses should be used if at all possible.
7. All employees at the center and all notices to possible users be informed of the dangerous roads and the concern over safety on the roads.

Thank you very much for permitting me to speak to the Board of the NVRPA on this occasion. I will be willing to help with further planning for the Hemlock Overlook facility, and wish to be kept informed of all actions pertaining to the future of the facility.

Sincerely,

David A. Smith
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