

Park Service Stirs A Hornet's Nest

Tenleytown Unhappy With Eviction Notice

Res. Sections Tenleytown Parks

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The National Park Service, under fire from neighborhood groups for expanding commercial uses of a tennis center in Rock Creek Park, is now entangled with a trio of Tenleytown groups over rights to a parks building that has served as a community center for 15 years.

Three weeks ago, the Park Service abruptly notified leaders of the local Advisory Neighborhood Commission and two neighborhood planning councils who run programs in the building that they must move out by Oct. 1 or face eviction.

The 1930s-era building on the edge of Fort Reno Park is owned by the National Park Service, but the councils and commission have occupied it rent-free and maintained it since 1976.

Park Service officials said they want the dilapidated two-story building on Chesapeake Street NW to house a support organization whose profits are channeled into Park Service programs.

"We just ran out of space," said Maria Spencer, executive director of the association. "We don't get a great deal of joy out of kicking anyone out."

Community leaders said they were stunned by the notice. They said there is no money for rent set aside in their combined \$60,000 a year budgets and no alternative at hand.

They also said the building, although in poor condition, offers an ideal location for youth programs that would be hard to duplicate, situated as it is at the hub of a four-school area and within walking distance of the Tenleytown Metro station.

The Parks and History Association that would use the building is one of 64 "cooperating associations" nationwide that are contracted by the Park Service to sell books and pamphlets at park facilities and then donate their proceeds to the Park Service.

The Parks and History Association serves the 23 park facilities in the Washington area, generating \$1.2 million in revenue last year and \$225,000 in profits for the Park Service.

It has been renting offices on MacArthur Boulevard NW for \$36,000 a year, and Park Service officials say it could even renovate the old Fort Reno Park building and still be ahead financially next year.

"These guys [association members] are well-heeled. They raise a lot of money and rent first-class office space," says Steve Raiche, chairman of ANCHS. "They [probably] can gut and redo the building. I haven't even got enough money to hire a cleaning person."

The ANC occupies a tiny office in the building with room only for a desk and some file cabinets. Weekdays, the five small remaining rooms are jammed with youths from throughout the city who come there for computer training, job-search seminars and music and drama workshops run by the neighborhood planning councils. The councils, financed by the city recreation department, also help find jobs for local youths and administer recreation events such as tennis and open air concerts in Fort Reno Park.

"We need to be near this park, near these schools. The association can be anywhere in this city," said Saul Strauss, an ANC commissioner and the program director for the neighborhood planning councils. "Fort Reno Park may be a national park on paper, but to the people who live here, it's our local community park."

Park Service officials said they simply are space-strapped and were looking for a cheaper location for the association. Although their notice to the ANC offered no suggestions, they are now proposing that the ANC and neighborhood councils move to a vacant building at the top of the hilly park, a forbidding hulk of property owned by the District and in even poorer condition than the building on Chesapeake.

"Since these are District agencies, and that is a District building, we thought it would be a good idea for them to talk," said Burnice Kearney, director of local operations for the Park Service. "There was never any thought on the part of the Park Service that these kind of community operations would cease to operate."

Strauss said the alternative site is too far from the streets and inhospitable for young people, but it would be perfect for the association.

Ward 3 D.C. Council member Jim Nathanson (D), who residents turned to for help, agreed.

"There's no reason the Park Service people couldn't go up there," Nathanson said. "There would just be a swap in use."

This week, Park Service officials said they would extend the 90-day deadline, but stopped short of saying they would either back down on their proposal or compromise.

Charles Atherton, the association's chairman, said he would much prefer the Chesapeake Street site. But D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) said she will try to broker a compromise.

"It's hot in the summer and probably cold in the winter, but yet there's this incredible attachment to it in the community," said Norton after a visit to the Chesapeake Street building this week when it was bustling with youngsters in various workshops.

Turning to Kearney, she added: "Unlike the community, you're not attached to this bit of space."