



By Wendy Lathrop, LS, CFM

Wendy Lathrop is licensed as a Professional Land Surveyor in NJ, PA, DE, and MD, and has been involved since 1974 in surveying projects ranging from construction to boundary to environmental land use disputes. She is a Professional Planner in NJ, and a Certified Floodplain Manager through ASFPM.

Diversions in the Park



The 168,000 square foot School of the Future in West Philadelphia is too massive to fit into a single photo; about a quarter of the school shows here. It faces a street of intricately detailed if somewhat decaying brick homes built in the late 1800s.

There is not a lot of unused land in our urban and increasingly suburban areas. It disappears under shopping centers and houses and roadways at a rate unimaginable a century ago. So it may not be unusual to start eyeing land that was set aside for parks and open space at the end of the nineteenth century as various societal pressures begin to mount.

Philadelphia's Fairmount Park system is rooted in a public cause: a growing awareness that industrial waste polluted the Schuylkill River, a primary drinking water source for the city's citizens. After years of scattered purchases of riverfront property, 1854 legislation authorized the city to purchase land within its jurisdictional boundaries to protect water quality. A year later, with the donation of the Lemon Hill estate and its dedication to the public as a park, Fairmount Park was officially underway. Eventually a

total of 4180 acres formed Fairmount Park, and together with 63 neighborhood parks, the Fairmount Park system encompasses approximately 9200 acres. But that number is decreasing.

It is not news that many inner city schools are underfunded and overcrowded, conditions less than optimal for preparing students for productive modern-day adulthood. Recognizing that the city had not built a new high school in nearly thirty years, Philadelphia School District's CEO approached Microsoft in 2003 to consider building its proposed new School of the Future, "a prototype that is aesthetically pleasing, technologically advanced, environmentally friendly and can be replicated throughout the world on a traditional budget," as a real school in Philadelphia rather than as a display at Microsoft's home office in Redmond, Washington. Microsoft said "yes". Amid the excitement, one detail nearly scuttled the project: where could it be built?

In the end, the \$63 million, 168,000 square foot School of the Future opened in September 2006, housing about 700 students in grades 9 through 12 on approximately eight leased acres in Fairmount Park in West Philadelphia. The building, constructed in accordance with the LEED Green Building Rating System, incorporates photoelectric glass to generate part of the building's power supply while providing real-time data for students to see how much energy is being generated and the resulting positive impact on the environment. While in stark contrast to nearby Centennial Hall, the main centerpiece for our nation's 100th birthday celebration, the school is impressive in its sustainability, if not entirely aesthetically appealing on the outside. It is, however, a highly innovative magnet school that is fully equipped with wireless and mobile technology, not to mention outdoor amphitheater, indoor performing arts theater, and a 9,000 square foot gymnasium.

continued on page 71



The front entrance to Fox Chase Medical Center faces wooded parkland. Directly behind Fox Chase is Jeanes Hospital, to its left is a city street, and to its right are playing fields that are part of Burholme Park.

Lathrop, continued from page 72

But isn't this an unacceptable diversion from the original intent of the park system? The Fairmount Park Commission, as part of Philadelphia's City government, had a balancing act to perform. In considering any impact to the city's water supply or water quality, broader quality of life issues finally tipped the scales in favor of diversion from park use to school use, favoring brain cells and leasing revenues over open space.

Now the Park Commission faces a similarly difficult choice in another section of the city, one that has at times been characterized as saving a park versus fighting cancer.

The Ryerss family built its mansion "Burholme" in Northeast Philadelphia in 1859, and the terms of an 1895 will bequeathed the house and its surrounding 85 acres to the City to be used as a park, museum, and library "free to the public". Currently Burholme Park is heavily used, situated in a dense urban residential area where few green spaces exist.

Immediately adjoining Burholme Park is the Fox Chase Cancer Center, internationally known for its research while also providing treatment for cancer patients. Shocking statistics tell us that incidence of variations of this disease is on a dramatic rise, and between labs and hospital services, Fox Chase is bursting

at the seams. To remain in its current location, it proposes to lease 19.4 acres of Burholme Park in a 20-year expansion plan and to offset the diverted park area with other land. After identifying a 15-acre replacement tract nearby but disconnected from Burholme Park, the Fairmount Park Commission approved the plan in March 2005, but the first shovelful of dirt has yet to be moved.

In March 2008, Philadelphia's City Council passed a bill also approving the lease to Fox Chase, noting that without the possibility of expansion in place, Fox Chase would probably locate its new facilities outside the city or even relocate its existing facilities beyond its limits, with "significant deleterious effects on the City because of the resulting loss of jobs for City citizens, the economic impact on the surrounding neighborhood, and the loss of a leader in the health care industry in the City." On the other hand, keeping Fox Chase in its present location would "create thousands of both temporary and permanent jobs, expand the City's tax base, and keep Fox Chase at the forefront of cancer treatment and research" while not impairing the mansion, its surrounding grounds, or the ball fields. What would disappear would be the golfing facilities.

There are of course more details to the story. But weighing the economic impact

any such transaction might have on city revenues, job growth, or employment opportunities against quality of life issues is never easy. In the Fox Chase situation, unlike the School of the Future, there is also a will to consider, and Pennsylvania's Orphans Court is now hearing the arguments.

At times, neither wills nor land use regulations stand to preserve open space needs. Twenty miles down the highway, Valley Forge National Park finds itself with several "in holdings" within its authorized boundaries, held by private owners hoping to capitalize on being surrounded by 3500 acres of Revolutionary War campgrounds and historic structures. In 2001 the National Park Service was unable to purchase one such 62-acre tract, which developer Toll Brothers bought for its usual suburban residential sprawl. A grass roots campaign led to the federal government's 2003 purchase of that tract for three times what Toll Brothers had paid.

But in 2007 another group acquired 78 acres with plans to build a conference center, hotel, retail, campground, and museum as "the American Revolution Center," a hotly contested development. At present the locals have enlisted the National Parks Conservation Association in a suit against the township over the zoning change enabling such a proposal. The defense, of course, is economic. *AS*