



April 5, 2018

To: Columbia Association Board of Directors
Milton W. Matthews, President/CEO

From: Dennis Matthey, Director of Open Space & Facilities Services

cc: Susan Krabbe, Vice President & Chief Financial Officer

Subject: Neighborhood Center Strategic Plan

This memo recommends the implementation of a long term strategy to reduce the number of neighborhood centers from 14 existing neighborhood centers to 6. Several of the neighborhood centers are currently in need of, or will soon be in need of, significant capital allocations for maintenance of existing programming. Ongoing capital and operating expenditures associated with the neighborhood centers will create an additional 30 year commitment to the neighborhood center concept. Rather than simply continuing to fund the neighborhood centers status quo, staff recommends that the CA Board consider whether or not the value added from the neighborhood centers is consistent with funding requirements and if not, implement a long term strategy to reduce the number of neighborhood centers from 14 to 6.

Background:

There are 14 neighborhood centers distributed in what might best be described as an arbitrary manner across 7 of the 10 Columbia Villages. The 14 neighborhood centers range in size from 586 to 4,900 square feet and were primarily built in Columbia's early development; thus, they average 45 years old. The majority of the buildings were built to residential standards and do not meet existing building codes for ADA compliance and energy conservation. I asked Barbara Kellner, former CA archivist, to research the neighborhood center concept in the Columbia Archives and while no specific information is available, she found that Mort Hoppenfield said the following:

“A neighborhood center consists of K-5 elementary school supplemented by daycare and preschool centers, a small convenience store, a swimming pool, park and playgrounds. The neighborhood center is seen as a complementary set of facilities and services convenient to the most place bound member of an urban community.”

Anecdotally, the CA neighborhood centers were initially developed as daycare co-ops managed and staffed on a voluntary basis by immediate neighbors. Over time, the co-op daycare concept has largely given way to for-profit daycares independently operated and serving the local, as well as the larger, Howard County community. The small convenience stores have all closed, save for the Running Brook 7-11, and the K-5 elementary schools are far fewer in number than CA's 14 neighborhood centers. The Columbia landscape has changed significantly over the last 50 years and what was cutting edge when Columbia was founded could not have imagined the internet and cell phones and video games and two wage earner families.

Recommendation:

With an average age of 45 years old, the neighborhood centers present a substantial capital and operating challenge to CA resources. It is not a question of whether or not the neighborhood centers are used, but rather whether or not the long term capital and operating expenditures add commensurate value to the Columbia community. Staff is recommending the CA Board approve a plan to take the Locust Park Neighborhood Center out of service at the end of this fiscal year and to replace the building footprint with a passive park. The same thought process would be applied to 7 of the remaining 13 neighborhood centers, ultimately leaving 6 in service. CA acknowledges that the Community Associations may derive net income from the neighborhood centers. In those cases, the reduction in net income that a Community Association derives from a neighborhood center could be offset through an increased grant from CA to the respective Community Associations, based on CA review of financial statements and lease and rental documents, a mutually agreed upon two or three year average of the net income derived, etc.

The Columbia concept to create a better and more livable city should remain constant, but the manner in which we provide services to the community should adapt to changing priorities as CA moves forward.