

street talk

Monroe Park to Get \$6 Million Makeover

On the first day of fall semester at Virginia Commonwealth University last week, scores of students mill about the sidewalks outside three high-rise dorms. Except for a handful of passers-through, Monroe Park directly across West Franklin Street is empty.

The fortunes of the historic and prominently located park — characterized in recent decades by minimal maintenance, a visible homeless population and underuse by VCU students and staff — stand to rise dramatically when and if a proposed \$6.3 million makeover is completed.

It's been six years since the Monroe Park Advisory Council, a 12-person group, was established with the blessing of then-2nd District City Councilman William Pantele. Councilman Charles R. Samuels continued his support for the project, and the group says it's ready to move forward with a plan that will make the 7-acre Fan District park enticing to a broad audience for a variety of activities.

Mayor Dwight Jones and VCU President Michael Rao are behind the project and have indicated they'll work together, says Alice McGuire Massie, advisory council chairwoman.

The master plan, developed by Alexandria-based design firm Rhodeside & Harwell with working drawings recently completed by Richmond-based 3North, respects many of the traditional characteristics of the park, Massie says, maintaining its surrounding and diagonal walkways; restoring the generous canopy of shade trees; and welcoming all user groups. The plan will attempt to recapture the historic spirit of the space as it was in 1904 and update it for contemporary use.

Among the features of the plan are:

- Sidewalk and lawn improvements, which will be established at the same grade to enhance pedestrian safety and allow such activities as Frisbee or football.



SCOTT ELMQUIST

Alice McGuire Massie, chairwoman of the Monroe Park Advisory Council, here with a large scale model of enhancements proposed for the historic space, says funding will be a public-private endeavor.

- Designated pedestrian park gateways that will relate to surrounding streets and create a sense of place.
- A lawn for picnicking, concerts and staging other events.
- Replanting trees along the surrounding streets with longer tree wells. Newly planted trees include varieties from the park's original tree inventory.

- Renovation of the Checkers building, the octagonal, brick park house, to include a cafe and restrooms. Various adjacent areas will be designed to accommodate flexible seating and game areas for chess, quoits and other activities.
- A new water feature that would appeal to families with young children.

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- Retail kiosks that will offer seasonal merchandise, art, handcrafts or books.

- Replanting the park's perimeter in a ground cover to delineate the overall green space from the surrounding city sidewalk and capture runoff.

Working documents are complete and, according to Massie, the city has committed \$1.1 million toward the overall project for initial subsurface work such as plumbing, sewer and electrical upgrades. She says additional funding will come from the city and private sources. "The city can't get started pulling the park apart until we've raised enough money to put it back together," she says.

Massie says construction could begin as soon as next April, after the Monument Avenue 10K, which finishes in the park. "Construction could be carried out during the summer when many of the students are away and planting could be carried out beginning in the autumn," she says. — EDWIN SLIPEK JR.

Cooch Loses Round One in U.Va. Probe

Hard-charging Attorney General Kenneth Cuccinelli has run into a legal fence in Charlottesville.

Albemarle County Judge Paul M. Peatross Jr. has thrown out five civil investigative demands issued by Cuccinelli against the University of Virginia in his probe of possible fraud by global warming specialist Michael Mann.

Peatross ruled Aug. 30 that the attorney general had not shown that the CIDs were relevant and had not sufficiently "stated the nature of the conduct" that's allegedly fraudulent.

Mann, who left U.Va. in 2005 and teaches at Penn State University, says human activity has contributed to global warming. Cuccinelli, a staunch conservative who doubts global warming, believes that Mann fudged research while at U.Va. Cuccinelli is demanding data and e-mails from 40 scientists around the world.

The case has gained international attention and outcries from such groups as the American Association of University Professors and the Union of Concerned Scientists, which says that at least one of Cuccinelli's demands seeks information that has nothing to do with Mann.

The Charlottesville judge also ruled that Cuccinelli has the power to issue such demands against the university and could come back with revised ones.

Since taking office in January, Cuccinelli has issued a series of controversial opinions and filed several politically motivated lawsuits. Cuccinelli advised public universities to abandon anti-gay discrimination policies, claimed that the Environmental Protection Agency cannot regulate carbon dioxide, and that Christmas decorations can be erected on public property if equal space is given to other religions. On Aug. 2, a federal judge in Richmond allowed his lawsuit against a new federal health care plan to proceed. — P.G.

More Children Live in Poverty, Report Shows

Childhood poverty in the Richmond region is on the rise.

An analysis of U.S. Census data by the United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg finds the percentage of children younger than 18 who live in poverty — in a region including Richmond, Petersburg and surrounding counties — has jumped from 11.9 percent to 14.8 percent, an increase of 8,516 children.

Census numbers for 2010 are not yet available and the United Way report reflects a period between 2000 and 2008. But the report highlights notable trends in poverty for the region, which also includes the cities of Colonial Heights and the counties of Charles City, Chesterfield, Dinwiddie, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, Powhatan and New Kent.

Richmond is home to the highest percentage of young people living in poverty, 35.6 percent, followed by the city of Petersburg at 30.7 percent. The region's overall childhood poverty rate — 14.8 percent — is slightly higher than the overall state rate of 13.6 percent. The federal government deems a family of four with annual income at or below \$22,050 to be living in poverty.

In addition to the jump in childhood poverty, the rates of overall poverty, children receiving free or reduced-priced school lunches and births that were to single mothers also rose between 2000 and 2008.

The total population living in poverty in the region rose from 8.5 percent to 10.7 percent, an increase of 29,621 people. The most impoverished areas in the region are the city of Richmond, with 25.1 percent of the population living in poverty, followed by Petersburg, with 20.1 percent of residents living in poverty.

Hanover County has the smallest

Cusack Becomes Poe, Just Not in Richmond

Was Edgar Allan Poe offed by a serial killer after leaving Richmond in 1849?

Well, no. He most likely wasn't. But that's the premise of a new film in which Poe, Richmond's favorite Gothic son, will be played by John Cusack. "The Raven" is the fictional story of Poe's last days, in which he stalks a serial killer who's kidnapped his fiancée.

In real life, Poe reunited with childhood sweetheart, Elmira Shelton, in Richmond in the fall of

