

OPEN LETTER

Dear Falls Church City Citizens,

We are writing to you on behalf of the members of the George Mason High School Athletic Boosters Association regarding our priorities for the new Mason Campus redevelopment project.

George Mason High School is a nationally ranked school academically that also offers a multitude of clubs and a variety of junior varsity- and varsity-level athletics to include girls and boys soccer, lacrosse, swim, dive, basketball, tennis, cross country, and track & field, in addition to football, baseball, softball, volleyball, golf, wrestling, field hockey and cheer. We have a proud tradition of fielding competitive teams despite our small student-body size. We hope to continue this tradition, but need community support.

A proposal has been floated to lower the overall budget for the Mason Campus redevelopment project by eliminating certain proposed athletic facilities. While we understand the need to reduce the financial burden of the project, slashing funds for athletic facilities in an effort to lower the budget is short sighted. Compared to other Northern Virginia high schools as well as to most of the schools we compete with in the Bull Run District, the indoor and outdoor athletic facilities at Mason are inferior. Particularly worrisome is the plan not to include a competition gym at the new school due to the misconception that we already have one at MEHMS. The reality is the gym at MEHMS is a middle school gym and does not meet the standards of a high school competition gym. Mason needs to have a space to assemble its entire student body and the new school will be built to accommodate a capacity of 1,200 students, with flexibility up to 1,500 students. A competition gym built to Virginia High School League (VHSL) standards would accommodate these assemblies and allow Mason to host graduation on our campus, avoiding the cost and hassle of renting out DAR Constitution Hall each year.

Below is a comprehensive list of athletic department requirements to maintain a level of standards expected by City of Falls Church residents as well as all high schools in the VHSL. We are not asking for the moon, but simply for indoor and outdoor athletic facilities that will be on par with those of our competitors. Mason needs two gyms total: one competition gym and one auxiliary gym. One of Mason's current gym spaces could potentially be modified into a suitable auxiliary gym. However, funding for **all** of our needed athletic facilities should be incorporated into the cost of the new high school. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we need the School Board and City Council to make the best decision for our students and the entire community.

Indoor Athletic Facilities that Need to be Included in the Mason Redevelopment Project:

- A Competition Gym as defined by VHSL state standards needs to be included on the Mason Campus. Specifically, a competition gym has a 25' ceiling, a 50'x94' basketball court, seating capacity for 1,500, a minimum of 10' outside the basketball court boundary lines, and total minimum dimensions of 114'x112'.
- An Auxiliary Gym that can be used for basketball practices, rec league basketball games, and many other activities.

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- A multi-purpose or dedicated practice room for wrestling, which can also be used for PE, cheer, and tumbling needs to be included on the Mason Campus. We currently cannot effectively host meets at GMHS or MEHMS. Wrestling currently practices in the MEHMS “rock room” without the extra padding needed for safety reasons. There are often conflicts with MEHMS events and sharing the space increases hygiene risks and skin infections. Also, there is no concession stand at Mason to serve wrestling meets, which are all-day events. Due to the size and weight of the wrestling mats, they cannot be moved over to MEHMS.
- Indoor cages for baseball/softball need to be included in the new competition gym or the new wrestling room.
- Weight Room
- Concession Stand

We currently have three substandard gyms at Mason: the Mustang Gym at MEHMS, the “Pit” and the “Aux” gym.

- **Mustang Gym at MEHMS Deficiencies:**
 - MEHMS gym seating capacity is too low. Current seating capacity is 1,000, while VHSL standard is 1,500. Most Bull Run District schools seat 1,400, but Mason is being built to accommodate 1,200 students, with flexibility up to 1,500.
 - According to VHSL standards, the length of the basketball court is too short (84' vs 94').
 - Ceilings are too low for state sponsored volleyball events.
 - The entrances to the gym floor open directly on to the court, which is not in line with safety/security codes (the doorways should be on the side).
 - The training room is not located on site at MEHMS so in the event of a serious injury, a staff person is required to run over to Mason to retrieve the needed equipment (e.g., crutches). Ideally, all athletic department related offices (e.g., Athletic Director's office, Athletic Trainer's office) need to be under the same roof as the competition gym.
 - MEHMS only has two locker rooms. Four locker rooms are needed for Home and Visiting teams. We strongly believe girls and boys should not share locker rooms and each should have designated locker rooms of their own. This will allow Mason to host tournaments and double headers in a safe manner, which we currently cannot due to our limited number of locker rooms.
 - Not easily ADA accessible. There are access issues for disabled visitors due to ticket sales being located on the stairway landing and bathrooms being located upstairs.
 - No Repair/Maintenance Supplies for Scoreboard/Finances located in the MEHMS gym. Currently, these needed supplies are in the AD's office at Mason.
 - Ice and water must be carried from Mason because the MEHMS machine is too small and is frequently broken.

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- Scheduling conflicts with MEHMS often lead to our athletes losing practice time and games needing to be rescheduled three to four times per season.
- **The “Pit” Gym Deficiencies:**
 - Weight room capacity is 15 people total and equipment is unsafe and old. P.E. classes and sports teams that use this weight room are already over capacity. This is a serious safety issue.
 - Cannot easily monitor student section in the bleachers.
 - Seating capacity is 760.
 - Basketball court is too short.
- **The “Aux” Gym Deficiencies:**
 - The \$8,000 wrestling/cheerleading mats are currently stored on the floor of Aux gym and are constantly being damaged by P.E. classes and rec league basketball spectators climbing/sitting on them.
 - Zero seating capacity. The Aux Gym has no bleachers/seating so the floor is constantly being damaged from rec league basketball spectators bringing in chairs from the cafeteria.

Outdoor Athletic Facilities that Need to be Included in the Mason Redevelopment Project:

- Stadium. The stadium is used for football, soccer, lacrosse, field hockey, track & field, P.E. classes, and many rec league practices and events. Its turf and track were recently replaced and ideally it will remain untouched.
- Turf practice field. Mason does not currently have a turf practice field and instead must use an open grass space near the rear of MEHMS for sports practices. In addition to MEHMS recess and its ASAP program, as many as eight spring sports teams share this space and the stadium for practices. Rain frequently causes the upper field to close, and while Mason Athletics and MEHMS adhere to the closures other organizations do not and end up ruining the grass, which is costly to resod and/or repair. A turf practice field will allow teams to guarantee practice space in the event of rain and generate rental income from various local sports organizations such as FX Sports and Corporate Kickball.
- Softball Field
- Baseball Field
- Six tennis courts so we can host tennis matches. We currently have four courts, but only two are playable, which means that we have to rent tennis space for practices and “home matches” at nearby facilities at a cost of \$3,140 per season.
- Concession Stand

For the benefit of the entire community, the new indoor athletic facilities at Mason would ideally include an elevated track and a swimming pool. Both of these amenities would be available for use by the community and would provide tremendous benefit. The estimated \$10 million cost of the pool will easily be offset by income from renting it out to local swim clubs considering the excessive demand for pool time. Mason’s state championship

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winning swim team currently practices two hours per week at Yorktown HS at a cost of \$5,000 per season.

As current use indicates, the Mason athletic facilities are used not only by GMHS and MEHMS students, but by the community at large. Falls Church City Recreation Leagues and numerous other NoVA leagues currently use the facilities for basketball, soccer, LAX, flag football, football, baseball and softball. The Mason facilities are in almost constant use over the summer for camps, generating \$500,000 in revenue directly to the City of Falls Church Parks & Recreation Department. In fact, the Mason indoor and outdoor athletic facilities are in use for roughly 2,600 hours per year and FCCPS receives \$143,000 in rental revenue each year from the City of Falls Church Parks & Recreation Department. Knowing the extent to which the greater community uses these facilities, we are hopeful that you will see the value of investing in this space that benefits so many. In short, reducing gym space will lower the City's revenue, while adding gym space will increase the City's revenue.

Everyone agrees that we need to build the best school we can with the funds available. The motto at Mason is "excel in mind, **body** and character." Over half the students at Mason participate in athletics. We understand that the cost of these athletic facilities is a big ticket item and there is a natural desire to slash the big ticket items. The current high school is over 60 years old, however, and the new school is expected to last just as long; therefore, it is common sense to build a school that fits the needs of our students and our community for that length of time or longer. We believe this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and we owe it to future generations of Mason students and athletes as well as the community at large to get it right the first time.

We urge the community to see the big picture and realize the positive impact athletics have on our school culture and our community as a whole and make the required investment in our athletic facilities.

Sincerely,

The GM Athletic Boosters Association Board
Tom Johnson, President
Becki Creed, Vice President
Jill Martin, Treasurer
Kate Nesson, Secretary