

Editorial

Not on track

There's an old adage about someone who "cuts off their nose to spite their face." While certainly a bizarre image, it means that someone inflicts harm on themselves in their great hurry to get at someone else.

It appears that's what the city's doing by building light towers literally right on the track at Francis C. Hammond Middle School.

There are several important facets to this issue – and a lot of attendant noise. But here's the bottom line: The City of Alexandria is currently deliberately destroying a track used by a middle school and nearby neighbors, many of them low-income, in Alexandria's West End for no good reason.

The elements at play here involve equity, honesty, a lawsuit and plain old common sense.

The word equity is tossed around a lot in this city, often in a self-congratulatory way. But too often decisions are made that are anything but equitable.

Hammond is surrounded by apartment complexes filled with low-income residents. Anyone whose child played soccer on the sunken field not-so-fondly remembered as "Death Valley" knows what a neglected wreck the grounds of the school were for years. As Alexandria resident Frank Putzu points out in his commentary on the next page, this finally began to change a decade ago, when the track at Hammond was built.

A mere 10 years later, Alexandria's City Council and School Board are allowing this track to be destroyed so that an adjacent field can be lit – and mainly used at night by adults. Imagine the uproar if a comparable facility were being destroyed at George Washington Middle School in much more affluent Del Ray.

Putzu and many other residents are complaining that city staff have pulled a classic bait and switch maneuver. They claim that during hearings on potentially lighting the field at Hammond, presentations showed poles for the lights outside the track.

But, oops, staff apparently forgot about the city's setback requirements and so when the matter came before council for a vote, the light tower had been moved from outside the track to the first lane on it.

The issue at hand is not whether it's discernible that the revised drawings in a graphic depicting tiny light poles at the back of the large project application clearly showed the light poles' location. The question is:

Did City Council members knowingly vote to destroy the track at Francis C. Hammond Middle School last November? And does the School Board agree with this destruction of Alexandria City Public Schools property? Every member of both bodies should honestly answer this question.

The Hammond situation is further complicated by the existence of a lawsuit from people opposed to lighting the field at Hammond, regardless of where lights would be placed. The only prism through which the city's actions on this topic make any sense at all is that they will go to great lengths to "win" on this issue of lighting fields.

A verbal pledge was broken when lights were added to the football field at then-T.C. Williams High School back in 2018. The subsequent decision to light fields throughout the city has also been contentious – and litigious.

We have no qualms with lighting many-to-most of the athletic fields in the City of Alexandria. We actually are agnostic on whether this particular field at Hammond should be lit. But destroying the Hammond track, a useful community asset, to light an adjacent field is utterly lacking in common sense.

We hope Vice Mayor Amy Jackson and Councilor Alyia Gaskins are able to fix this fiasco, as leadership on this issue is sorely needed.

Editorial

Live up to our ideal

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

So reads the last stanza of *The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus, which is inscribed on a plaque inside the Statue of Liberty in Upper New York Bay.

Close to Ellis Island, where more than 12 million immigrants arrived in the United States, the statue famously welcomes those seeking to start new lives in this country.

Juxtapose that ideal with the reality related in today’s page 1 story “From machine gun belts to bed bug welts” about the living conditions of many of the more than 1,000 Afghan refugees who have settled in Alexandria since the U.S. military pullout from that country more than two years ago.

The images of that chaotic exodus are unforgettable: a rescue plane packed with people of all ages; desperate Afghans clinging to – and some falling to their deaths from – the outside of a plane; Afghans crushed trying to enter the Kabul airport or killed, along with U.S. soldiers, in an explosion at its gates.

Virtually every family had a member who assisted the United States in some way during its occupation of Afghanistan following Osama bin Laden’s use of that country as a base from which to launch the September 11 attacks – which took place 22 years ago next week. Most of those who made it out left with nothing more than the clothes they wore.

These people and their families were at risk of being retaliated against, tortured or killed at the hands of the Taliban if they had stayed. Sadly, not everyone who helped the U.S. made it out.

It’s difficult to imagine a group of people who were more deserving of refuge on our shores.

Yes, those who reached the U.S., including the people depicted in the Times story, are fortunate to be here. A rat or bed bug bite certainly isn’t as bad as facing the Taliban.

But what does it say about us, and the ideal expressed in the Statue of Liberty and Lazarus’ poem, that we bring refugees here and subject them to these conditions?

It’s also important to note that, despite our investigation, we don’t believe that any of what we described in the story was deliberate.

Certainly Lutheran Social Services, which does great good around the world, has helped many refugees over many years relocate to Northern Virginia. Their CEO strongly implied in an interview with the Times that their options for placing refugees are limited.

The organization Resettling Afghan Families Together – which has helped many Afghan families locate furniture for their new homes, and has tutored them and helped them find jobs – is a remarkable nonprofit with a core cadre of dedicated volunteers.

And even Morgan Properties, which owns a series of rodent and bedbug infested buildings in Alexandria, is still not a villain. Refugees come to this country without credit ratings or money in hand and often without jobs. Meeting the refugees’ basic need for shelter by taking a risk on the newcomers’ ability to pay rent is actually noble in its intent.

However, the discrepancy between Morgan Properties’ self-congratulatory language on their website and the reality within several of their Alexandria buildings would be laughable if it weren’t so repugnant.

It’s ultimately up to the city’s code enforcement staff, and the Alexandria Health Department, to hold Morgan Properties accountable. While getting rid of rodent and bug infestations, particularly in large buildings, is difficult, it’s not impossible.

Frequent inspections and strict fines should compel the extensive, ongoing effort necessary to eliminate these infestations. We owe that assistance to the people who aided us in Afghanistan during our country’s 20 long years there.

Editorial

Just own it

The worst thing about a mistake is not usually the error itself, as everyone and every organization occasionally gets things wrong. What's unacceptable is when the person or entity continues to deny a mistake when incontrovertible evidence stares them in the face.

We are referencing the reaction of the Alexandria Police Department to the violent attack on a woman in Old Town on the night of September 1. APD – and Chief Don Hayes in particular – have refused to admit that they erred in not notifying the public that the attack took place, and that the attacker was at large.

The department continues to insist that APD protocols were followed “to the letter,” as Hayes told City Council at the September 26 legislative meeting. He has repeatedly blamed social media and other media for “inaccuracies” – despite being given multiple opportunities by the Times to provide clarity – while totally absolving APD.

Really? Let's parse the different pieces of proven information about this incident, because they clearly indicate that APD should have notified the public by early morning on September 2.

Here are the facts about the September 1 incident:

1. The dispatch calls from the police scanner initially referred to the incident as an “**assault.**” In the second call labeling it an assault an ambulance was requested because the victim suffered an injury to her face. A police officer is then heard saying the incident was being relabeled as a “**robbery.**”

The incident was labeled a robbery by APD from the beginning.

2. The Commander's Daily Watch Log from September 1, which the Times obtained in a Freedom of Information Act request, refers to the incident as “**Abduction/Attempt Robbery.**” It also says the victim, a Black female, was “grabbed and pulled a short distance away by the suspect.” A Fairfax K-9 unit was called and CSI was notified. The report says the APD public information officer was notified and a “Command page sent” – meaning Hayes and other top officials were notified via text message that a notable incident had occurred.

A source familiar with APD operations told the Times this report should have gone to Hayes and other top APD

officials within an hour of the incident.

3. The city's crime report database lists two entries for this incident, the first is case 23-082086 and refers to the incident as a “**robbery.**” The second case number is 23-082086* and lists the crime as “**KIDNAPPING/ABDUCTION**” in capital letters.

During the September 26 City Council meeting, Hayes contradicted his department's second report on the incident. In this meeting Hayes said, “The abduction just meant that the person wasn't free to leave at that time. It doesn't mean that the person was kidnapped. They weren't kidnapped.”

4. The APD's directives, which are posted on the City of Alexandria's website, state in 10.21 that the following situations will be taken into account when notifying the public of an incident:

“Has a command page been issued?” **It was.**

“Should the public be notified for safety reasons?” **The assailant was still on the loose.**

“Is there a community interest due to a crime trend?” **There is.**

The directive later says that the public should be notified “through Facebook, Twitter, eNews, and the Police Department's website” for:

“Stranger Sexual Assaults,” **When the suspect was apprehended last week, he was charged with abduction with intent to defile.**

“Robberies.” The incident was labeled as a robbery from the start.

Not immediately alerting the public that this violent abduction and robbery took place was a violation of APD's published directives.

5. Security video that captured the incident was available by September 3, yet the owner of the video told the Times that police did not reach out to them asking to see the video until September 14.

Many questions remain about this incident. Why did Hayes not direct his PIO to issue an alert on the morning of September 3 after reading the command report? If he didn't read the report, why not? And why did it take two weeks – and a blowup on social media – for an APD officer to watch the security video?

It's time to stop with the denials and insinuations. APD made a mistake that hopefully won't be repeated. Just own it.