

Louise Gengler Thomas: Pittman playing politics with Tennis Center project | COMMENTARY

CAPITAL GAZETTE |

NOV 13, 2021 AT 5:00 PM

County Executive Steuart Pittman is playing games at Millersville Park, but he is not playing tennis. He is playing politics.

When Mr. Pittman took office in 2018, the Tennis Center at Millersville Park project was teed up for success waiting for Mr. Pittman to act. The not-for-profit sector would provide capital and deliver 50 years of affordable indoor/outdoor recreational opportunities for all ages and abilities. The project and funding had been approved by every County Council since 2016 — the site passing every test.

Mr. Pittman is now stopping the Tennis Center at Millersville Park project in its tracks. He announced in the Capital (Oct 29 front page by Dana Munro) that his administration plans to “repurpose” the tennis center money from tennis and “reprogram” the site, abandoning the entire project. He then says, “We’ll make a plan for tennis.” That new plan for tennis has no site, no funding, no scope, no vision. With no site, there is no tennis project.

It is inferred that the County Council killed the project on Oct. 18 by not approving the lease with Coppermine, LLC., the entity selected through the RFP, or request for proposal, process to partner with the county, the county having exited a partnership with the Tennis Alliance in 2019. Public hearings on Bill #73-21 (approval of the Coppermine lease) were held with diligent

council review. Compelling public testimony supported the tennis center project, but opposed a 50-year license (two 25-year terms) to Coppermine to operate a for-profit health club with some tennis and uncertain public benefits. The council rejected the lease (4-3). The council did not reject the project or kill the project; they voted on the lease.

Mr. Pittman has the authority to continue a path forward for this public benefit project if he so chooses. The RFP process states “the next highest-ranked Offeror” may be considered, JTCC (Junior Tennis Champions Center). The Tennis Alliance reached out to JTCC, a not-for-profit 501c3, which then responded to the RFP with the Tennis Alliance named as an affiliated partner with local relationships in the community.

Mr. Pittman can keep the site for tennis and explore options with JTCC or others. The site has met state and county laws for traffic (another study is planned) and stormwater management (the current site sends untreated farm runoff into our streams). Mr. Pittman approved the lease naming the Millersville Park site.

Yet, Mr. Pittman wrote Millersville residents on May 27, 2021, reporting that an awardee had been selected through the RFP process. He said, “I still didn’t like the location.” He continues: “So it is with mixed emotions that I report to you that the Millersville Tennis Center project remains on track. … As committed as I am to smart growth and preservation of natural resources, I have learned in this job that I can’t undo decisions that were made in the past.”

Mr. Pittman, you are undoing eight years of work by your Recreation and Parks Department, which delivered on a priority recreation project with a good site, state funding, and two RFP-qualified partners to save the county

half the capital cost. You are also undoing eight years of community organizing.

On Oct. 18, the lease was rejected. On Oct. 29, you announce the site and funding are stripped from tennis.

That is essentially 10 days to kill an eight-year project set to deliver 50 years of public benefit.

To add to this whimsical decision, the Pittman administration simultaneously announces that the Millersville site will now likely include multipurpose fields that bring much more traffic, noise, parking, and higher, more powerful lighting, than the tennis center. And is there a partner required for this new venture that will likely cost the county far more?

Mr. Pittman, please stop playing politics, collaborate, do the hard work, and execute the tennis center project that improves quality of life and health for county residents.

Louise Gengler Thomas is the president of the Tennis Alliance of Anne Arundel County.