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From the Desk of CA President Phillip Nelson

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Last month, Michael McCall, president/CEO of the Inner Arbor Trust, led the roll out of one of the most creative and imaginative plans for the first phase of development of Symphony Woods Park. As you might recall, Columbia Association (CA) went through the first eight steps of the county's development process last year, and received approval from the Howard County Planning Board.

At that meeting, the planning board placed some stipulations on the approval, i.e., that CA should plan for more meandering pathways, reduce the number of trees that had to be removed and work with the neighboring Merriweather Post Pavilion to make the park and the concert venue a true neighborhood in the spirit of the Howard County General Development Plan.

In February 2013, the CA Board of Directors voted to approve a new development plan for the park prepared by McCall and to form the trust to oversee the second phase of the county's development process and construction of the park.

The board chose to make the change so that the trust could seek a 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. As a 501(c)(3), the organization can seek grants that CA cannot; the CA board also placed a stipulation that at least two CA board members and the CA president would be members of the Inner Arbor Trust.

The new Symphony Woods plan that was presented last month not only meets the county planning board mandates that fewer trees would be removed from the park, but also provides a network of the aforementioned pathways. The plan also shows an unofficial partnership between the trust and Merriweather to form a true neighborhood that will be even more accommodating for events like Wine in the Woods and Festival of the Arts.

The new plan also provides an array of venues that not only will make the neighborhood a place for social interaction, but will make the park even more compatible with nature. A new amphitheater that has an incredible design and functionality will be the focal point for Symphony Woods. The stark fence that separates Merriweather and Symphony Woods will be replaced by a semi-natural venue called the Caterpillar. This 12-foot-high structure will have an outer shell that will be made of natural vegetation and will be an interactive venue, rather than a barrier.

Another venue will be called the Picnic Table. It will be built using the trees in Symphony Woods, which removes any need to remove any more trees. The table will be a place to relax, have picnics or just enjoy a drink in the beauty of the woods.

There is also what's been dubbed a "play" area in the form of a maze, but it's designed for the enjoyment of all age groups. Another feature of the area is the public service building, called the Butterfly Building, which will offer restaurants and public restrooms; but, most importantly, it fits with the beauty of the woods. The roof of the building also will be a public place capable of accommodating close to 300 people. The idea of using the roof as a "people place" is to get closer

to the trees, rather than taking the trees down.

The plan is indeed different, but it is a plan that fits Columbia. The plan is a partnership, not only between the primary players (CA, Howard County and Merriweather), but mostly with the community. McCall and the Inner Arbor Trust Board are working closely with the primary partners and with the community in making the neighborhood concept something that the community can be proud of, as well as a place for people to enjoy nature, entertainment and each other.

And, as always, if you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at Phillip.Nelson@ColumbiaAssociation.