

Notes From Hillside, November 2024

Written by Bill Santos, Wilde Lake Representative to the Columbia Association Board of Directors (Columbia Council). Bill serves as Chair of the Columbia Council

Notes from CA Board Meeting 11-14-24

At the November 14, 2024, meeting of the Columbia Association Board of Directors, the following items were discussed:

- Resident Speakout
- Preliminary FY2026 Budget discussion
- CA Strategic Plan
- Overview of Columbia Villages

Resident Speakout

Resident Speakout is an important part of the CA Board of Directors meetings. It is a unique time and place where residents can speak to the entire board in real-time. Several residents spoke about the deer population in Columbia. Each speaker listed the detrimental effects of deer overpopulation: increased risk of Lyme Disease for humans, deer-car accidents, and harm to the native plants in our area. One resident remarked, “You never see native tree saplings, the deer eat them all.” That comment hit home with me.

Love them or hate them (or somewhere in between), it is a fact we have a deer overpopulation problem. For the last few weeks, residents from all over Columbia (including Wilde Lake residents) have been emailing the CA Board about the deer overpopulation problem. CA staff have also communicated this to the CA board for many years. Another common theme among the residents who testified at the meeting was that CA must act. Although it was not said directly, it was strongly implied that action meant reducing the deer population by culling the herd.

Although I am in complete agreement regarding deer overpopulation, and the need to take action to reduce the number of deer in our community, I have important questions and concerns that we need to work through. Primarily, I have deep concerns about using live ammunition (either gun-based or bow-and-arrow) on sections of CA open space near residents’ houses, tot lots, and dog walkers. A plan may well exist that allows for culling the deer herd while ensuring public safety in a compact environment, and I am open to that

possibility. Still, it has to be presented and explained in detail before I can endorse such activities.

Preliminary FY2026 Budget

Given the Strategic Budget Objectives approved at the October 25, 2024, CA Board meeting, CA Staff presented a “first look” at the broad outlines of the FY2026 CA Budget. Highlights from the presentation and discussion include:

CA staff recommends holding the Annual Charge Rate at \$0.68/hundred and the Annual Charge Cap at 3.5%. So if you own property under the CA lien/assessment, your bill will be charged at a rate of sixty-eight cents (\$0.68) per hundred dollars of your home value. If the assessed value of your home increased over the last year, the highest increase CA can charge this year is 3.5% of the value.

CA staff also indicated there will be increased Personnel Expenses in FY2016 due to local and federal regulations. On the local level, CA (along with all local businesses) will see the full-year impact of the \$16/hour minimum wage requirement. This is expected to be up 7% over last year, and 36% from 2021. Due to federal regulations regarding 401k eligibility,

CA expects an additional increase in personnel expenses.

Concerning memberships, CA staff indicates that membership prices will rise modestly over FY2025. This increase is necessary due to the increased costs to CA to keep the facilities (pools, ice rink, fitness clubs, tennis, golf, etc.) open and operating. Although costs are increasing, they are still below year-over-year inflation costs. Coincident with this news, CA staff also indicated they are exploring “...new resident membership affordability/accessibility opportunities, such as the expansion of the Special Pricing (formerly known as “Income Qualified”) and creation of a group membership not related to housing or family relationships.” Because the 11/14/24 discussion was preliminary, there were few details on this program, and I expect more specificity in the coming months.

On the staffing front, CA will seek to fill long-vacant and critical positions during FY2026. The positions to be filled are in Construction and Facilities, IT Operations, and Risk Management.

For preliminary numbers, CA staff is projecting a bottom line at the end of FY2026 of \$3,449,000. With a projected budget of greater than \$86M USD for FY2026, this represents approximately 4% of the total budget and is consistent with proper budgeting practices. On the capital budget side, CA staff projects a capital budget of \$14.5M USD. This is an 11% increase over FY2025 but is consistent with pre-COVID capital budgets (when CA was

effectively smaller in size) and reflects the greater need to fund repairs and renovations of our aging CA-owned facilities.

As a final reminder, this is all a first take on the budget process. With input from the community (including the Wilde Lake community) and the CA Board, CA staff will shape these initial contours into a draft budget by the January CA Board meeting.

Strategic Plan

In May 2023, CA began updating the organization's strategic plan. The first 12 months were led by a consultant and a final report was provided to the CA Board in March of 2024. The CA Board accepted the consultant's final report but did not endorse the recommendations in the report. During this fiscal year, a second consultant engaged the CA Board, the CA Senior Leadership Team, and a few Village Board Chairs (all were invited, and a few (including the WLVB Chair) attended) regarding the strategic plan. CA staff then assessed the body of work and interviewed CA Board members again. The result of 15 months of work was presented at the November CA Board meeting. This presentation is summarized as follows:

Staff distilled all the assembled data into **four (4) Strategic Focus Areas**:

- Community Connection,
- Wellness,
- Environmental Sustainability,
- Resource Resilience

Since the November board meeting, I have been contemplating these focus areas. Although some of these focus areas are not the first thing that comes to my mind when considering the strategic direction of the Columbia Association, I believe if we incorporated at least one of these focus areas (and ideally, more than one) in everything CA does in the next five years, I believe CA will be successful. It is in that way that I endorse the above focus areas.

In addition to the focus areas, CA staff also identified **five Strategic Emphasis Areas**:

- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging
- Modernization
- Awareness of Value/Identity
- Risk Management
- Affordability/Accessibility

In the context of the strategic plan, the Strategic Emphasis Areas should be present in each Strategic Focus Area. The way I think of the Strategic Emphasis Areas is as metrics to measure how the Strategic Focus Areas are applied.

The action item for the Board of Directors was to consider the information presented, consider a mission and vision statement, and be prepared to make a final decision on the strategic plan at our January 2025 meeting.

Overview of the Columbia Villages and Financial Statements

Each year, CA staff provide an overview of the relationship between the Columbia Association and the ten Columbia Villages. This presentation is accurate in describing the relationship between all eleven organizations; however, despite the best efforts of the staff, it always feels cold and clinical to me. I believe that one of the characteristics of a healthy and thriving Columbia is a positive and reciprocal relationship between CA and the Village Associations. If these relationships are strained, the Columbia community suffers. If we are all rowing in the same direction, the Columbia community thrives. Lastly, this overview rarely delves into the historical relationship between the associations. The current relationship is much different than it was back in the early years of Columbia, and this evolution is important to understand as time passes.

Aside from the overview, CA staff also presented some basic data on the financial health of the Columbia Villages. From the financial data presented, the Columbia Village Associations are in various states of recovery in a post-COVID high inflation environment. Using some metrics, progress is being made. For FY2023, three villages (Harpers Choice, Kings Contrivance, and River Hill) had an increase in net assets and the cumulative deficit was \$264,825. Last year (FY2024) only two villages (Wilde Lake and Long Reach) saw an increase in net assets, and the remaining eight saw a decrease in net assets. However, the total loss of all villages in FY2024 was \$57,234. So overall progress is being made, but the villages are not completely in the black yet. Kudos to the Wilde Lake Community Association Board and staff on their overall financial performance.

The next Columbia Association Board of Directors Meeting will be held on December 12, 2024, at 7 PM.