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Members of the VOICE congregations, who worked to help gain support for the facility improvements, respond to the announcement that it was successful.

PHOTOS BY RENÉE RUGGLES/MOUNT VERNON

'West Poor' — No More

Advocates celebrate success in creating new fields in Mount Vernon.

BY MICHAEL LEE POPE
THE GAZETTE

When athletes at West Potomac High School travel to other schools in the region, they often hear students call their school "West Poor." That's because the school has notoriously bad athletic fields, ones that are so bad they have a reputation that stretches across Northern Virginia. That's all about to change, though, because advocates for athletic fields have persuaded Fairfax County leaders to invest \$3.5 million to improve conditions up and down the Route 1 corridor, where poverty rates are some of the highest in the county.

"Dilapidated facilities say that people don't necessarily care," said Jennifer Knox, associate organizer for VOICE. "Facilities matter for safety and the amount of practice time that you get, but it's also a source of pride and respect in your community."

The effort began at the end of the school year last year, when leaders of VOICE organized a community meeting at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Gum Springs. More than 400 people showed up, and parents and young people

testified about their frustration. But they also had a remedy in mind, and leaders of VOICE made the case to elected officials about remedying disparities.

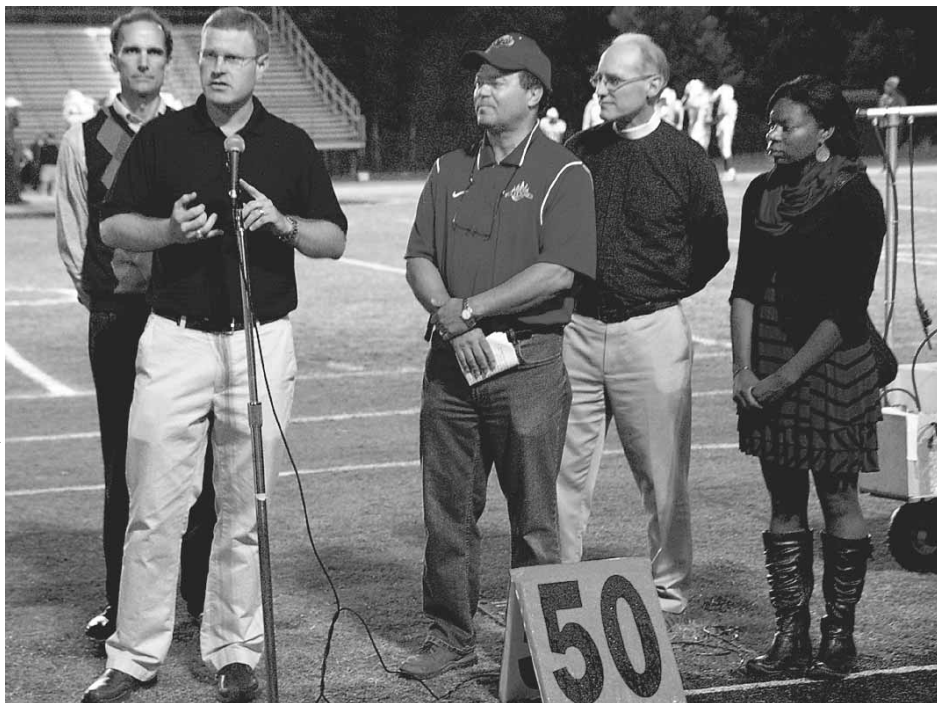
"We are the part of Fairfax County that the rest of Fairfax County would like to forget about," said Crystal Compton, parent of a West Potomac football player. "Our community is underserved in all aspects, whether it be the care given to our shopping centers, our roads, our schools or our recreation parks."

SINCE THAT FIRST meeting in June 2012, Lee District Supervisor Jeff McKay helped get improvements at Muddy Hole. That's where two diverse football teams practice without goal posts. Last year, McKay was able to secure funding to install new goal posts and expand the field to be regula

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FCPS Board Member Dan Storck talked to the crowd about supporting the schools. West Potomac High School needs to raise an additional \$50,000 to fully fund the new field.



Supervisor Jeff McKay talks to the crowd about the role the supervisor's office had in diverting \$2.2 million to help West Potomac and Mount Vernon high schools with the need to improve their athletic facilities.

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tion size. The money came out of the maintenance budget for the Fairfax County Park Authority.

More recently, organizers at VOICE persuaded the manager of Audubon Estates trailer park to invest \$15,000 into making improvements. Recent years have seen more and more trailers added to the property, leaving neighborhood children without a place to play sports. So VOICE leaders gathered information and made their case to Audubon Estates, making the case that neighborhood children were forced to either cross Richmond Highway or travel almost two miles to the nearest athletic field.

It worked. Leaders at Audubon agreed, and now dilapidated playground equipment will be removed to make room for a mini-soccer field where younger children can play. As for the older youths, VOICE leaders are still hoping to persuade county leaders to purchase an adjacent property currently under consideration to be a transportation center. If the property is purchased, VOICE leaders say, the county could transform part of the property into a larger soccer field for older children.

"It's really a minimal investment," said David Smith, manager of Audubon Estates. "This is a largely

Hispanic community, and they love their football."

PERHAPS THE BIGGEST success leaders of VOICE have had since starting the campaign is scoring more than \$3 million to create new sports fields at Mount Vernon High School and West Potomac High School. The money, carryover funding from last year's surplus, is \$1.5 million from Fairfax County and \$1.5 million from Fairfax County Public Schools.

"It's an important investment in neighborhoods that are long overdue," said Knox.

The money will be purchasing storm-water runoff infrastructure as well as synthetic fields, an upgrade that will allow state tournaments as well as the financial advantage of receiving conference money when other teams come to use the field. For many people, the

investment into the poor and Latino community in the Mount Vernon area is a realization of a longtime goal — one that's still unfolding.

"This is an area that has a high concentration of students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch," said Rick Genuario, booster president at West Potomac. "So it's not like parents here can go out and raise millions of dollars the way they can in other parts of the county."

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