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### Response To Assault Questioned

Attempted sexual assault case raises concerns about safety on bike trail.

By Gale Curcio

July 22, 2004

Ruth Matthews wants to know why it took so long for somebody to respond to an emergency call she placed last Tuesday after learning that a teenage girl had been accosted by a man on the George Washington Parkway bike trail.

“A 16-year-old girl was running and was accosted by a man with a gun on the trail near the Tulane Drive exit off the Parkway. There is a parking lot on the south side of the parkway there and benches on the trail. She got away, and stopped me from going in that direction, telling me there was a man with a gun ahead,” said Matthews, who had been running towards where the incident had happened. Matthews stayed with the girl and together they flagged down a biker, who called 911 on his cell phone.

“We called police using 911. It took them over half an hour to respond to the scene. Once there, one park policeman said he’d been about a mile away and that the dispatcher had sent him to Belle Haven Marina though I had clearly and repeatedly told the dispatcher that we were about one mile south of Belle Haven park on the trail.

“The 911 dispatcher told us she couldn’t reach Park Police. She sent Fairfax County police at last after asking repeatedly where we were since she was unfamiliar with the area, and then finally the Park Police showed up in force, including with a helicopter. Still, it took them over a half hour for them to get there — plenty of time for the guy with the gun to get away before the cops ever thought to come.” Once the police did arrive, they proceeded to do an investigation with officers on foot and in helicopter. They combed the area just north of the stone bridge and Dyke

Marsh, but did not find any suspects.

DETECTIVE R.M. ABT, who is the lead investigator on the case, said that they are still investigating the incident. When asked if they were checking whether or not there was a connection to the incident that happened recently on Holmes Run bike path in Alexandria, she said that “they’d be foolish not to.” She did not, however, speculate on whether or not there was any connection.

A press release was issued by the Park Police with a general description.

Matthews said that the victim told her that the suspect was “not tall, not very heavy — maybe 5’4”, wore jeans and a light T-shirt. Maybe Hispanic. The gun was in his pants waistband in front covered by a T-shirt.” The victim said that he did pull the gun as he threatened. Matthews said she asked the police what she could have done to get a faster response.

“He thought we should have given street crossings, but what more could we have told her since we were on the trail and I hadn’t noted what mile marker we were at? It’s important to be aware, but as many times as I’ve been on that trail over the years, I don’t have that mile marker info memorized — and the dispatcher didn’t know the park, or the parkway, it seemed, since she was Fairfax County Police, not Park Police, and it is Park Police jurisdiction,” Matthews said.

MPO Greg Kottemann, crime prevention officer, said that he spoke to Lt. Joe Hill, commander of the Fairfax County 911 Dispatch Center, and said that it may have seemed like a long time, but the records showed that Fairfax County had responded within 10 minutes; he wasn’t certain about the Park Police response. Kottemann said that while the Park Police maintain the parkway itself, Fairfax County also has concurrent criminal jurisdiction over the area. The helicopter that was sent came from Fairfax County.

“My advice for using the bike trail is to pay attention to landmarks (like the stone bridge) and mile markers. Runners should always have a cell phone with them and we encourage people to not wear headphones while running,” Kottemann said. “Recognize your surroundings and if you’re not sure where you are, go out to the parkway and point out where you are.”

ABT ALSO advises runners to carry a cell phone. Matthews said that Abt told her that women alone should not be out on the bike trail without a cell phone and suggested programming the number for Park Police, which is 202-619-7300; this would eliminate the need to go through the 911 system. Matthews was

also told that this number was posted along the trail, so after the incident happened, she went out and checked. She said that there was one notice posted by the rest rooms at Belle Haven, but the number had faded and could not be seen. Another bulletin board located near Northdown Road had the number, but that was barely legible. Matthews said that there was nothing in between.

Matthews' main concern is that people know what's going on. She posted a report on one of the runner's clubs Web sites and is hoping that somebody will post signs (with emergency numbers) along the trail again.

"I think that women running, walking or biking alone will want to know this happened. They can then be more alert and observant," Matthews said.