

# Fair Access For All

## Reston Accessibility Committee hosts discussion on community disability rights.

BY ALEX McVEIGH  
THE CONNECTION

**M**arion Stillson moved to Reston in 1972, five years after a car accident left her in a wheelchair. The Americans with Disabilities Act, which prevented discrimination on the basis of a disability, was still 18 years away. But Stillson remembers Reston even back then was willing to make changes to improve accessibility.

"Reston prided itself on accommodating all people. When the first supermarket opened, I asked if a small ramp could be put in to allow me to get from the parking lot to the store, and it was installed within a week," Stillson said.

Since then, Stillson has become the president of the Reston Citizens Association, as well as an advocate for accessibility rights throughout the community.

The Reston Accessibility Committee held a panel discussion at the Reston Association Headquarters Sept. 30 titled "Disability Rights and Accessibility: A Practical Approach for the Reston Community," in which disability rights and accessibility issues were discussed in an open forum.

The keynote speaker for the event was David Homenik, a disability rights advocate for the Virginia Office for Protection and Advocacy (VOPA). Homenik spoke to the crowd about various issues going on in the state.

He mentioned a recent lawsuit against the Virginia Lottery, in which disabled people couldn't access stores that sold the lottery tickets.

"We're not as concerned that someone couldn't go into stores and spend \$1 on the Powerball, but such a lawsuit helps make buildings accessible so people can get in the stores to buy milk, food and whatever else they need," he said.

**THE WORK** the VOPA performs doesn't just apply to those with physical disabilities. They also do work on behalf of people with emotional disabilities on issues such as support animals, restaurant access and changes in movie theater technology to help the hearing impaired.

As a local business owner, Fazal Sirhandi said that he has made it a practice to make sure his business locations are accessible to all.

Sirhandi owns a few gas stations and Subways in the area.

"From my point of view, it's the right thing to do, it's the law and it's just good business," he said. "It's not that expensive or complicated to make your business accessible."

He mentioned that a common habit was to shorten space between aisles in order to fit more product, but it means less access for those with physical disabilities.

He said the commitment to serving all customers starts with his staff, and that he makes it "a part of the hiring process, to make sure that staff understands our commitment to all customers."

Ken Fredgren, chairman of the Reston Accessibil-



PHOTO BY ALEX McVEIGH/THE CONNECTION

**Matt Barkley, director of Fairfax County's Disability Services Planning and Development and Marion Stillson, president of the Reston Citizens Association.**

## Accessing Resources

Fairfax County has many resources available to people with disabilities.

- ❖ **Department of Public Works and Environmental Services:** 703-324-5033. For accessibility fundamentals, visit [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/publications/ada\\_fun.htm](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/publications/ada_fun.htm). For the DPWES comment form, visit [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/contact/mailform.aspx?ref=450](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/contact/mailform.aspx?ref=450).
- ❖ **Office of Human Rights:** 703-324-2953, or [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hrc](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hrc). A complaint form can be found at [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hrc/complaint-public-accomodations.htm](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hrc/complaint-public-accomodations.htm).
- ❖ **Office of Equity Programs:** 703-324-2207, or [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/oep](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/oep).
- ❖ **Disability Services Planning and Development:** 703-324-5421, or [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/dspd](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/dspd). For legal resources, visit [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/dspd/legal\\_resources.htm](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/dspd/legal_resources.htm). For the Fairfax County Disability Services Board, visit [www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/dspd/fa\\_dsb.htm](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dfs/dspd/fa_dsb.htm).

ity Committee (RAC), said that there are a lot of little things that should be taken into account when it comes to accessibility to all.

"A significant problem we've been seeing is the topography of parking lots," he said. "Developers make sure floors in their buildings are even, but often not the parking lots. There are some locations where there's a six-to-10-foot difference in elevation from one end to the other."

The RAC works with business owners to improve accessibility. He calls it "addressing the question of fair access to American life."

They have worked with such places as Hunters Woods Shopping Center, the North Point Village Center and the Reston Home Depot to name a few.

Stillson can still remember asking people to back her car up when she couldn't get into her car, because there were no handicapped parking spots. She said she would sometimes have to park diagonally across two spots, just to ensure that she would be able to get herself back in the car.

**WITH THE LACK** of accessibility features back then, Stillson said that even things that seem mundane details for some were a big deal to her.

"I remember going to get pool passes from the RA building, and there were two steps to get from the parking lot into the building," she said. "I went with my seven-year-old son, and we waited and waited and no one came that could help me up. So he tried to push me up, but my chair tipped over and all of a sudden there were people everywhere."

And the next time I went to the RA, there was a ramp."

The RAC can be contacted through the Reston Citizens Association website at [www.restoncitizensassociation.org](http://www.restoncitizensassociation.org), or by contacting Fredgren at [fredgren.k@gmail.com](mailto:fredgren.k@gmail.com).

# Expert Opinion

## Pulitzer Prize winner speaks about architecture, Reston's future.

BY ALEX McVEIGH  
THE CONNECTION

**T**he Reston Community Center hosted Pulitzer Prize winner Paul Goldberger Oct. 5, and he spoke at length about Reston's future with the coming of the Metro Silver Line.

Goldberger, who writes an architecture column for the *New Yorker*, said that the event was a first for him, speaking in a town where the town founder—Robert Simon—was in the audience.

"William Penn wasn't there when I spoke in Philadelphia," he said, getting a laugh from the more than 50 people present.

Goldberger said urban architecture is most appreciated by pedestrians, since they are the ones walking among the buildings. The car brought people away from that, he said, but the automobile trend was fading.

"It's an extraordinary time because for the first time the automobile is receding in its ability to shape urban form," he said. "We've begin to recognize the environmental consequences of too much reliance on cars. We want places to be built denser, we want to strengthen urban cores and encourage more walking."

**MANY** of the audience members were members of the Reston Master Plan Special Study Task Force, and Goldberger acknowledged how important their planning was.

"Very little about Reston, good or bad, is an accident, and very little about its future will be an accident," he said. "Reston is about as far from a laissez faire city as you can get."

Goldberger pointed out examples from New York City about how dense construction can create a truly unique urban environment.

"If Reston is to grow, I think it would be much healthier to grow in a dense way at the core, than to keep filling more and more land and spreading out," he said.

Goldberger also took questions from the audience, and since many were part of the task force, they were curious to hear his thoughts on Reston's future.

"We have had many, many meet-

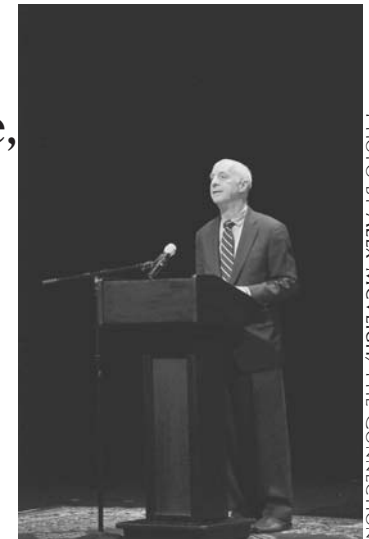


PHOTO BY ALEX McVEIGH/THE CONNECTION

**Paul Goldberger, Pulitzer Prize winner and architecture critic for the New Yorker, speaks at the Reston Community Center Oct. 5.**

ings ... about what is going to be here by 2050, and the numbers are staggering, up to 100,000 more people," said Kathy Kaplan, co-chair of Reston 2020's Residential, Urban Design and Livability work group. "What are the goals and benefits of having open space, especially with the changes that are anticipated?"

"If those numbers are even remotely true, then building well is all the more urgent, because nothing would be worse than trying to accommodate that kind of growth in an [urban] sprawl," Goldberger replied, "open space is a key part of it. My argument in favor of high density streets is predicated on the presumption that there are moments of relief in there, squares, piazzas, parks, that sort of thing located relatively frequently."

Leila Gordon, Reston Community Center's executive director said she hopes that Goldberger could become an asset for Reston as it plans for future growth.

"I hope this evening's conversation is one of several we'll be able to have," she said. "It is our hope to engage Mr. Goldberger as someone who might become very interested in Reston's efforts to re-imagine and re-invent itself in its own image."

**GOLDBERGER** concluded by expressing the hope that Restonians will always hold their town to a high standard.

"Architecture never exists in isolation, but as part of a larger whole," he said. "It's possible to combine the greatest, boldest and highest of aesthetic ambitions, and I hope you will always care for your architecture."