

**Parks and Recreation Committee Comments:
Arlington's Parkland and Open/Green Space Crisis
November 11, 2014**

These comments, presented in a frequently-asked-question (FAQ) format, provide background information to support the Arlington County Civic Federation Parks and Recreation Committee's proposed resolution to preserve and expand park lands and open space/green space in Arlington County.

1. Why are many citizens concerned about the possible loss or degradation of park land and open/green space in Arlington?.

For the past 60-plus years, Arlington County's planning documents have continually highlighted the County's open-space acreage deficit and the need to purchase additional park land and open/green space as the population increases. For example, a 1965 report prepared by the Northern Virginia Regional Planning and Economic Development Commission calculated the Acreage Deficit of Open Space in Northern Virginia at 2,500 acres, with Arlington County having the largest deficit at 1,080 acres (43%).¹

In the mid-1960s under the visionary leadership of County Board member Thomas Richards, Arlington County took specific measures to obtain additional land to offset anticipated development of the Ballston-Rosslyn corridor. These included purchasing property to establish the Gulf Branch Nature Center and the Davidson Farm to create Potomac Overlook Park (to be managed by the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority). Because of the success of Gulf Branch, a similar purchase was made at Long Branch to create the Long Branch Nature Center and augment natural areas in Arlington County.

The 2005 Open Space Master Plan still carries the same theme as iterated in the past: Not enough park land for the county. Below is a quote from that document:

“There is a strong documented need for aquatics, fitness, teen center, arts and multi-purpose spaces, along with need for additional outdoor trails, fields and natural areas.”²

In 1995, Arlington County contained 10.8 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. Since then, Arlington has acquired 76.43 acres of land for parks. During the same period, Arlington's population grew by over 43,000 people. So the county acquired only 13.4 acres of park land for every 1,000 new residents, and the ratio of park land to population fell 15% to its current level of 9.2 acres per 1,000 residents. The declining ratio of park land to population is part of the reason it has become so difficult for youth sports groups to schedule playing fields in county parks. (Note: Currently, there are 2,042 acres of park land within Arlington County's borders. Of that, 960 acres are owned by Arlington County; 947 acres are owned by the National Parks Service; and 135 acres are owned by the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority.)³

By contrast, Washington, DC, has 13.5 acres of park land per 1,000 residents, and Fairfax County contains a whopping 28.3 acres of park land per 1,000 residents. But Fairfax County considers that number to be too small: it wants to purchase an additional 2,015 acres for parks⁴ (Yes, that's a comma, not a decimal point!)

The same 2005 Public Space Master Plan also made a strong statement about the need to develop a strategic land acquisition program as opposed to opportunistic acquisitions:

“Priority 2 – Develop a Land Acquisition Policy
(Recommendation 1.2)

During the development of this plan, a detailed review of current land acquisition processes and policies was undertaken. The findings demonstrate the challenges the County faces in continuing to acquire open space in a climate where there is limited availability of land, the strong economy has driven up land prices and competition, and acquisition is more opportunistic than strategic.”⁵

Likewise, the Master Plan emphasized the need to acquire land for parks large enough to accommodate active recreation:

“Address the need to expand green spaces in the urban corridors in order to provide parks large enough to accommodate active recreation. Look for opportunities to make better use of existing public sites, such as the Wilson School/Rosslyn Highlands Park/Fire Station #10 Site.”⁶

A measure of the County’s effort to acquire park land to offset population increases and increased density is to see the amount earmarked for land acquisition during the biannual bond cycle for parks.

Attached to these comments is staff’s memo (C-2 Memo) issued on June 3, 2014, which summarizes park land acquisition for the past 20 years and was provided to the County Board in developing this year’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). A review of this history shows that between 1995 and 2008, funding for park land acquisition per two-year bond cycle was between \$4.0 and \$8.5 million, with most cycles at \$8.5 million. Since then, as explained in the C-2 Memo, there has been a decline primarily attributed to economic conditions. Over the last six years (since 2008), land acquisition bond funding has totaled only \$3.0 million, but it has been supplemented by a total of \$5.47 million in pay-as-you-go (PAYG) annual budget allocations. Yet, the total funds of \$8.47 million available for land acquisition over the last six years is still far less than the \$8.5 million that was the norm for **each two-year cycle** between 1996 and 2004 (an eight-year period). Overall for a 20-year period, bond funds for land acquisition has totaled \$55.0 million, with another \$5.47 million in one-time annual PAYG funds.

The C-2 Memo demonstrates that the County has not been able to fully implement a Land Acquisition Policy based on strategic objectives given the significant downturn in park land acquisition since 2008.

Acquiring land is costly, but being able to implement a Land Acquisition Policy for parks based on strategic objectives means allocating adequate resources to purchase sufficient land. Considering that the cumulative inflation between 2004 and 2014 was 26%, and assuming that as a policy the County wants to fund land acquisition at the 2004 level, then land acquisition for the

bond-fund cycle would be, at a minimum, \$11.0 million per two-year cycle. However to effectively reach “strategic” policy goals, the level should be at least \$15.0 million per two-year bond cycle.

Likewise, the listing provided in the C-2 Memo also shows that with the exception of Long Bridge Park and Fort Bennett, none of the acquisitions in the last 20 years has exceeded 10 acres. In the Rosslyn-Ballston corridor, a preliminary estimate indicates that less than 3 acres, total, has been acquired during this time period, even though this corridor has experienced Arlington’s highest growth in density. Most of the acquisitions are for small parks, which are not large enough to accommodate active recreational needs, as recommended in the Open Space Master Plan.

Given this backdrop, Arlington clearly lacks sufficient park land for natural areas and recreational activities and certainly not enough to consider repurposing existing park lands and open/green space for other uses. In fact, this analysis shows that the County is not implementing, on a timely basis, a strategic plan for park land acquisition to meet rising demand based population increases and higher densities, as was recommended in the 2005 Open Space Master Plan. By contrast, Fairfax County has a strategic plan that 10% of the land mass (25,280 acres) of the County be held as county parks.⁷ Using the same 10% criteria, Arlington’s goal for park land acquisition would be that 1,664 acres of the county should be held as park land (not to include land held by National Parks, or the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority).

2. Why does the Parks & Recreation Committee’s resolution encompass both County park land and school land? After all, in May the Civic Federation passed a resolution suggesting that Arlington Public Schools (APS) consider the possible environmental impact when considering new facilities.

Below is a quote from the 2005 Open Space Plan:

“Arlington County and Arlington Public Schools have a long history of collaboration and joint use of facilities to maximize the community’s investment in our public buildings. A variety of memorandum of understandings (MOU) and other types of formal and informal agreements have been developed and are currently in operation for facilities which have joint or shared use.”⁸

Given this close collaboration, it is appropriate that we address school activities’ impact on open space/green space. The resolution approved by the Civic Federation in May 2014 focused on environmental impacts, not open space.

The Parks Committee recognizes that Arlington Public Schools has a capacity issue, and for this reason creativity is suggested to address these needs while at the same time preserving open/green space. To a certain degree, both APS and the County are all ready doing this. The joint County Manager/Arlington Public Schools Superintend memo of May 13, 2014⁹ lists the Edison Center as a possible site to consider in addressing the school overcapacity problem. We would like to encourage them to continue this effort.

3. Affordable housing is a critical issue. Arlington businesses employ many low- wage workers, and County employees have difficulty finding a place to live in Arlington. Why shouldn't County-owned land be used for this purpose?

Let's be clear. This is not a zero-sum game of parks versus affordable housing. The question is how best to provide for affordable housing. There are several options besides using park land to address affordable housing.

The obvious options are purchasing land to build affordable housing units, and saving existing affordable housing units.

It is important to keep in mind that if the County moves forward with using public land for affordable housing projects, it would be operating as a quasi-housing authority. Yet, in 2013 Arlington voters rejected the creation of a housing authority by a 2 to 1 majority. The County Board actively opposed the measure, stating that the County could adequately address affordable housing without the need to establish a housing authority.

Arlington has an extremely generous affordable housing program. Approximately \$54.7 million or 5% of the County's annual operating budget is dedicated to affordable housing programs.¹⁰

4. Why is the debate about Public Land for Public Good limited to only land requirements for schools and affordable housing? Don't other governmental services also have land requirements?

Obviously the answer is yes. Discussion with other CivicFed committees indicate that there is concern that the focus of using public land only for schools and affordable housing has been too limited because there are other public-land needs, such as space for police and fire stations, libraries, stormwater detention facilities, etc.

Summary

Parks are public lands used for the public good.

Analysis shows that there is a significant existing acreage *deficit* in park land because park land acquisition has not kept pace with the rising population and increased density, as was promised. Consequently, there is no available park land for the worthy concerns of school capacity and affordable housing. Given this reality, the solutions for affordable housing and schools will require the need to purchase or lease land, or buildings, for these needs. Likewise, there may be additional land requirements to provide for other public services, such as police and fire.

The issue is not whether or not park lands should be repurposed. Instead, the County needs to implement a realistic land acquisition policy for providing governmental services for anticipated population increases and density.

Reflection

According to County government, Arlington will add 30,500 households by 2040, an increase of 30%. All these new households will need services: schools, fire stations, transportation, parks, playing fields, recreation/community centers, etc, etc. When you consider that almost all of these new households will be in multifamily buildings, mostly mid- and high-rise apartments and condos without much open/green space of their own, the need for open, green, and recreational spaces becomes even more acute. Either Arlington adds park and recreation facilities to accommodate all these new people, or the existing overcrowded facilities will be strained even more.

If we assume that the population will grow at the same rate as the number of households, Arlington's population will increase by an additional 67,000 people. In order to keep the ratio of parkland to population constant at 9.2 acres per thousand people (which is a low ratio), Arlington would have to acquire another 620 acres of parkland. But where will it come from?

¹ Action for Open Space, National Capitol Space Program Planning Report No. 1, Northern Virginia Regional Planning and Economic Development Commission, 1965, Appendix Table F, p. 107.

² Public Spaces Master Plan, Arlington's Public Spaces, Where the Community Comes Together, Adopted December 10, 2005, Arlington, Virginia, Objective One – Balance Acquisition and Development of Public Spaces p. 45. Web Address: <http://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2014/04/Chapter-5-Recommendations.pdf>

³ Data taken from *2014 City Park Facts*, Center for City Park Excellence, The Trust for Public Land, Washington D.C., 2014. Web Address: https://www.tpl.org/sites/default/files/files_upload/2014_CityParkFacts.pdf

⁴ Fairfax County CIP FY2015-2024 – Fairfax Park Authority section, p.2 Web Address: <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dmb/fy2015/advertised/cip/fcpa.pdf>

⁵ Public Spaces Master Plan (2005), Op. Ct., p. 43.

⁶ Ibid, p. 42

⁷ Fairfax County CIP, Op. Cit., p.2

⁸ Public Spaces Master Plan, op. cit., p. 44.

⁹ Joint County Manager / School Superintendent Memo issued as part of the Public Land for Public Good Initiative, May 13, 2014. Web address: http://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/31/2014/05/PLPG_MemoSchools_2014-0513.pdf

¹⁰ FY2015 General Fund (Operating) Budget, Arlington County, Summary of Housing Programs, P. 7. Web Address: http://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2014/08/FY15A_Budget-Summaries.pdf

Other Sources:

County Staff CIP Memo C-2: Department of Parks and Recreation – History of Land Acquisition Funding – June 3, 2014. Web Address: <http://arlingtonva.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/18/2014/07/C-2-Land-Acquisition-Funding.pdf>