



ARLINGTON COUNTY
SPORTS COMMISSION
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 414
Arlington, Virginia 22201



May 8, 2018

Ms. Jane Siegel, Chair
Arlington County Planning Commission
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 700
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Four Mile Run Valley Policy Framework

Dear Ms. Siegel,

The Arlington County Sports Commission would like to provide input on the Four Mile Run Valley (4MRV) Policy Framework. Our Commission is represented on the 4MRV Working Group (WG). Our primary interest in the project is the renovation of Jennie Dean Park and the possible addition of future sports and recreational amenities in the study area. For the reasons outlined below, the Sports Commission supports design Concept 1 for Jennie Dean Park and also supports further expansion of recreation space near Jennie Dean Park and in the study area.

Jennie Dean Park is an important location for sports in Arlington. At one time the sole park for Arlington's African American residents, Jennie Dean Park's connection to sports dates back over a century. (See Attachment 1 for some history about the park.) Today, sports amenities in the park include a lighted adult softball field, a lighted youth baseball diamond, two lighted tennis courts, and a lighted basketball court. Lighted playing areas are particularly valuable and important parts of our community's total field and court inventory. All of these amenities serve thousands of Arlington residents.¹

As noted in the Policy Framework, the Park Master Plan will "provide a vision for the comprehensive replacement and realignment (exclusively for park purposes) of existing park features and the addition of new park amenities to meet the growing demand for active recreation, cultural resources and natural resource preservation."

¹ The Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) registers about 1,600 adult softball players in the Spring and about 1,450 in the Fall, 90% of which meet Arlington residency requirements. In addition to DPR programs, there are several leagues that run private softball programs for Arlington adult residents that do not participate in DPR's program. These leagues rent softball fields from DPR and are subject to DPR's residency requirements. Arlington Babe Ruth and Arlington Little League register a combined 3,000 players in the Spring and 1,500 players the Fall. The Arlington Girls Softball Association registers about 500 players in its Spring season. Registration data is not available for tennis and basketball players. However, anecdotal information indicates that Arlington's public tennis courts are heavily used on weekday afternoons and evenings and all day on the weekends. There is also a growing pickleball community, serving adults and senior citizens, that uses some of Arlington's public tennis courts.

The Guiding Principles developed by the WG speak to the need to balance countywide and neighborhood needs, accommodating current and anticipated future demand; maintain the capacity of existing County facilities to the greatest extent possible; promote new arts and recreational opportunities for users of all ages and abilities; and maximize green, casual-use space in Jennie Dean Park and in other parks along Four Mile Run.

To the Sports Commission, this language indicates two important and linked goals: (1) maintain and improve all current sports and park amenities, and (2) increase opportunities for programmed and unprogrammed recreational activities. Given the increasing demand for Arlington's field and court inventory, the Commission regards the first goal as a minimum, mandatory outcome and the second goal as something to be achieved to the greatest extent possible.

Over the past 20 years, the county strategically acquired five properties in and near Jennie Dean Park to facilitate replacing, improving, and expanding park amenities. Two of these parcels are being used to expand the boundaries of Jennie Dean Park. Three are in the two-block area west of Nelson Street, and the use of these parcels is still uncertain, per the direction from the February 20 County Board work session. There remain several private properties within Jennie Dean Park that, if acquired, would provide for further expansion opportunities.

However, despite these acquisitions, we observed in the WG that there are more needs and desires for Jennie Dean Park and the acquired properties than can reasonably be accommodated. As a result, there still isn't currently enough land in the right places to make the redesign of Jennie Dean Park a simple, straightforward process. In particular, the uncertain future of the WETA property in the center of the park is a significant constraint. Instead, choices and compromises are necessary. Recognizing the growing tension over use of public spaces, the Sports Commission issued a position statement in 2016 on County planning processes to emphasize that Arlington County facilities need to represent the interests of all County residents (see Attachment 2).

Sports Commission Supports Concept 1 for Jennie Dean Park

As stated above, we believe the first goal for the park design is to replace existing sports and park amenities, preferably in Phase 1. But, neither of the Policy Framework's two concept designs achieves this. Concept 1 entails the loss of one tennis court in Phase 1, while Concept 2 delays the improvement of the small baseball diamond (as well as installation of the large picnic shelter) until Phase 2. Neither outcome is easy for the Sports Commission to accept; we are mindful that Phase 1 may be the full extent of the redesign, or at least for some unknown period of time. Commissioners weighed the respective size and costs of installing a court versus a field and were uncomfortable with failing to secure the larger and costlier amenities (the diamond field and the large picnic shelter) during Phase 1.

The Sports Commission voted unanimously on April 26, 2018, to support Concept 1. The reasons for our support include:

- An aesthetically attractive design with good circulation and orientation of park amenities;
- Near-term improvement of the softball field, baseball field, one tennis court, one basketball court, and the large picnic shelter in Phase 1 and full replacement of all sports and park amenities in Phase 2;
- Near-term replacement of all outdated lights with the newest technology;
- Appropriate orientation of the diamond fields for safety purposes;
- Full near-term removal of all built structures from the riparian protection area, allowing new trees to be planted as quickly as possible and opening up access to Four Mile Run; and
- Significant new contiguous casual use space, grass, trees, and landscaping along Four Mile Run Drive with the possibility of increasing casual use space along this street and in the interior of the park if and when additional properties are acquired.

The Sports Commission is aware that the Arlington County Tennis Association (ACTA) is opposed to Concept 1 because it does not replace two tennis courts in Phase 1. The Commission will continue to work with DPR and the County Board to explore all options to restore the second tennis court as quickly as possible. The Commission continues to believe that the site of the police warehouse, one of the three acquired properties west of Nelson Street, would be an ideal location for either a basketball court or two tennis courts.

The Sports Commission remains cautious about removing wide sections of baseline fencing from the softball and baseball fields. While our Commission fully supports making maximum use of Arlington's public facilities, the open-fencing pilots at Bluemont and Virginia Highlands have not been underway long enough for us to conclude that baseline fencing can be systematically removed from all diamond fields with no ill effects for field condition or safety.

Further Expansion of Recreation Space Near Jennie Dean Park and in the Study Area Should be Considered

As stated above, the second goal for park planning is increasing opportunities for programmed and unprogrammed recreational activities. Multiple sources of input, including the Planning Our Public Spaces (POPS) process as well as community input to the WG, indicate that more space is needed in the Four Mile Run Valley for both indoor and outdoor recreational activities. The redesign of Jennie Dean Park will help address some of this need, particularly by providing new casual use spaces, but we believe the demand will continue to grow.

Therefore, the Commission was disappointed that the WG had a split vote in support of using the three acquired properties west of Nelson Street as a future arts district.² We appreciate the Board maintaining flexibility for how to use these properties in the future, and hope the Board will be open to using these properties, at least in part, to help meet the growing demand for traditional park and recreational purposes. At a future date of park phasing, we believe the county owned building at 3700 S. Four Mile Run should be rebuilt and expanded to include some indoor recreational use. A building of this height is not a good use of the county's increasingly constrained park space.

Further, the Commission believes there are additional opportunities for expanding recreational opportunities elsewhere in the Four Mile Run study area, such as along Shirlington Road. While the Policy Framework does not explore such opportunities, we hope that the Board will continue to examine ways to expand recreational spaces in this area.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this important decision.

Sincerely,



Shirley Brothwell, Chair
Sports Commission

Cc: Planning Commission Members
Mark Schwartz, County Manager
William Ross, Chair, Park and Recreation Commission
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation

² The Sports Commission and Park and Recreation Commission wrote a joint letter to the Chair of the 4MRVWG on November 28, 2017, to express our concerns about these developments.

Attachment 1 – History of Jennie Dean Park

The current Jennie Dean field was originally called Green Valley Ball Park or Peyton Field. The name "Peyton Field" was used as the land was owned by James and Nettie Peyton. The Peyton family opened the area to the local community for recreational activities, including football and baseball games. There was also a motorcycle track and a dance hall. As early as 1910, Peyton Field was the home of the Black Socks Baseball Team, an amateur African American team that played other African American baseball teams on the East Coast. In addition to the Black Socks, other African American baseball teams that used the field as their home included the Arlington Athletics, Green Valley Quick Steps, Green Valley Black Socks, Jackson All Stars, and the Washington Aztecs.

When Arlington County acquired the field in the early 1940's, the name of the field was changed to Jennie Dean Playground. (Jennie Dean was a former slave and African American education advocate in the late 1800's. Most of her work was done in Washington, D.C., and Manassas, Va.) The Arlington County Department of Recreation was first formed in 1948-1949 and Jennie Dean Playground was part of the first group of parks developed by the Department. While changes were made, the County kept the baseball and softball fields that were there. Jennie Dean Park was the County's "sole recreation area" for African Americans when it was developed.

Ernest Johnson was the Supervisor of the Department of Parks' Negro Recreation Section when Jennie Dean was opened. (While schools in Arlington were desegregated in 1959, Arlington continued to have a segregated County Department of Recreation department until 1961.) African American youth baseball teams played other African American youth teams in the County, as well as, in Maryland and D.C. Adult African American amateur teams who played on the Jennie Dean fields participated in the Tri-State League against other African American teams from Maryland, D.C., and Virginia.

According to long-time Nauck resident, Dr. Taylor, the Jennie Dean fields were the center of the entertainment and recreation for the African American community in Arlington and it played a great role in people's lives. Whenever a baseball game was being played on the Jennie Dean field, it was a community event where everyone gathered for some entertainment and to cheer on their local team.

(Based on information collected by Arlington Little League Safety Officer, Matt Carlson, from Arlington County staff and Dr. Taylor.)

**Arlington Sports Commission
Position Statement for Planning Processes**

October 2016

“The Sports Commission, as requested by the Arlington County Board, seeks to ensure that Arlington has high quality sports activities, facilities and policies. It serves as a conduit for information about sports and physical fitness programs among community organizations, agencies of the County government and the Board.

The Sports Commission recognizes that any facility development or planning process in Arlington requires input from a variety of stakeholders. Many different parties claim interest in any given process, and typically there are several different outcomes possible in each process. The Sports Commission respectfully recognizes those varying opinions, and it also seeks to reinforce the notion that the entire Arlington community has primary “ownership” of public facilities. It is clear that the inputs of immediate neighbors (those physically close to the facility) need to be considered seriously. Those inputs may suggest the need for specific measures aimed at satisfying those immediately impacted by the facility. However, it is important not to lose sight of the needs and desires of the overall Arlington community, which merit strong consideration. Ideally all parties are in agreement, but when this is not the case, the Sports Commission believes that Arlington County facilities, and the planning processes that produce them, need to represent the interests of all County residents.”