



**ARLINGTON COUNTY  
PARK AND RECREATION COMMISSION**

**2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 414  
Arlington, Virginia 22201**



January 19, 2019

Honorable Christian Dorsey  
Chair, Arlington County Board  
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201

RE: Final Design of Ballston Pond Retrofit Project

Dear Chairman Dorsey:

The Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) received a presentation on the Ballston Pond Retrofit Project at its December meeting. We appreciate the thorough update, made by Aileen Winquist and Christin Jolicoeur, of DES, and support the concept and purpose of this project. We would like to offer some concerns about the final design as it relates to overall vision and value for this unique project.

The Ballston Pond Retrofit Project was originally begun in 2010 in response to newly enhanced regulations and standards to protect the Chesapeake Bay. An initial design was developed and the public process initiated on 2011. Several additional planning steps were undertaken the following year, but there were no other public process steps until 2018. A public meeting is now slated for January 30 to vet the final design, and construction is expected to commence in this calendar year.

Ballston Pond was originally created as merely a water collection area when I-66 was built, and it was not designed to provide any treatment or control functions other than to accept run-off. The retrofit will vastly enhance the collection and holding function, and also improve water quality for our streams, particularly Lubber Run and Four Mile Run.

But this project is also of interest to Arlington residents in several other ways. Reflecting public comment from earlier meetings, the presentation summarized these priorities:

- The community highly values the natural aspects of the area and wildlife viewing opportunities.
- The area is an important respite for people and wildlife in a highly urban corridor.
- A new viewing platform would be appreciated but must be separate from higher speed bicycle traffic on the trail.

These strong interests, expressed 7 years ago, are vastly reinforced by the findings of the survey

done more recently for the POPS process, and now incorporated as fundamental priorities in the final draft Public Spaces Master Plan. The final pond design now being presented for discussion does include features that will enhance the value of the pond as wildlife habitat and natural space. And, it includes a small viewing platform for visitors. PRC commends the selection of these design features, but believes that more can be done. To build the final design without a few additional features would be a regrettable loss of opportunity and unrealized potential.

The PRC believes that while the motivating core function is storm water control, the county should view the Ballston Pond retrofit equally as a project that creates a public nature park. The design will create a unique ecological niche in Arlington—a true wetland preserve—which will become habitat for a wide range of wildlife species, and an invaluable public asset. To take advantage of this potential, PRC recommends that a significantly more extensive public viewing capability be added to the design, in the form of several segments of boardwalk into and across portions of the wetland itself.

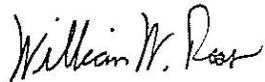
There are numerous examples of wetland boardwalks in American cities. Some are large, such as Huntley Meadows, south of Alexandria, with hundreds of yards of boardwalk, and attract thousands of visitors, school groups, researchers, and others. The Sunrise Valley Nature Park, in Herndon, created two decades ago, attracts public officials, biological science specialists, students, environmental and wildlife organization staff, and engineers, all of whom are interested in and learn from an example of wetland preservation in developed areas. An enhancement would provide in addition to signage, an interactive option that would connect a visitor with more detailed website information about the wetland habitat. The range of people and organizations that would be interested in a more accessible Ballston park, and the diversity of benefits that it can potentially bring, calls for a recognition that the facility is about more than controlling water. Particular and immediate benefit would accrue to:

- Arlington Public Schools, for science field trips and lessons based on a local and relevant experience with urban nature.
- The Department of Parks and Recreation, for additional and very accessible nature walks and a source of information about habitats and urban ecology.
- Residents of Arlington, generally, but particularly those in nearby neighborhoods and the higher-density developments in the western end of the Ballston corridor.
- The Department of Environmental Services, for the extremely important illustration that necessary public works also can create value, not just prevent problems. This is a message that is best conveyed with a greater amount of public access than is currently contained in the project design.

We believe that the expanded access of a more extensive boardwalk has a value to the county and its residents that vastly exceeds the cost. According to a recent report “Constructing Wetland Boardwalks and Trails” [Jon Kusler, Association of State Wetlands Managers, Inc. in cooperation with The International Institute for Wetland Science and Public Policy], the cost per linear foot of typical boardwalks ranges from about \$50 to \$100, depending on structural requirements, materials, and size. In the general context of Arlington neighborhood improvements and small park projects regularly exceeding \$1 million, a well-designed boardwalk system for Ballston Pond would be a very good value.

The PRC strongly recommends that the County Board consider the full potential of this project. Modification of the final design in public review, to include addition of walkways into and across portions of the wetland is a timely, cost-effective and high-return investment. Ballston Pond could become Ballston Pond Nature Park, to the advantage of all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "William W. Ross".

William Ross  
Chair, Park and Recreation Commission

cc: Members, Arlington County Board  
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager  
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation  
Greg Emanuel, Director, Department of Environmental Services