

December 20, 2018

Memo to the POPS Advisory Group

From: Shirley Brothwell, Sports Commission

Sports Commission comments on the final draft Public Spaces Master Plan

The Sports Commission applauds the effort by all those involved in the preparation of the October 24, 2018 final draft of the Public Spaces Master Plan (PSMP, colloquially known as the POPS Report) and supports many of the important recommendations it contains. **In general and with some noted exceptions, we approve of the draft PSMP report and the progress it represents in addressing important needs and issues related to serving County residents both now and in the future.**

People are attracted to Arlington and enjoy living here due to the many & varied amenities and services that are available. This report addresses frameworks for managing services, facilities and amenities and anticipating greater demand, all in the face of increased pressures around the County for other features and services. For the most part this report achieves a reasonable balance, serving many constituencies across Arlington.

However, we have serious concerns regarding the following elements which we believe need to be addressed in order to have a truly useful and meaningful report. These elements are:

- More transparency over practical constraints regarding new fields,
- Incomplete description of sports growth and demand,
- Inconsistent measurement by DPR of diamond and rectangular sport growth,
- Limitations of the Needs Assessment survey,
- Objective needs assessment and LOS should also apply to casual use spaces,
- Lack of clarity over decision-making process for turf and lights, and
- Importance of improved coordination with APS to maximize availability & stewardship of public spaces.

These elements are discussed in more detail below. Following that we have also attached a table with our reaction to other recommendations in the final draft PSMP. In particular, we are requesting that the Sports Commission be added as a potential partner on several action items.

More Transparency About Practical Constraints is Required

The main body of the draft report leaves the impression that the County intends to meet the recreational sports facility levels of service through repeated references to using the LOS to efficiently manage recreational space, identify where new facilities are required, and determine if duplicate or excess facilities can be converted to other uses. However, buried on page 195 in an appendix of the report is the following statement: *[LOS] standards show that Arlington will need an addition 11 rectangular fields and 2 diamond fields by 2035. At roughly 2 acres needed per field, Arlington would need to identify space within existing parks or acquire 26 acres of new land for fields, **which is not physically or financially practical** [emphasis added].* Therefore, the report notes, the best way to meet the anticipated demand is by maximizing existing facilities, in part through the addition of lights and conversion to synthetic turf.

The Sports Commission agrees that the County should first maximize existing facilities to the greatest extent possible before building new fields. However, the absolute imperative of this approach is not adequately stated in the draft document.

The Sports Commission recommends that body of the PSMP fully acknowledge the County's challenges in meeting the LOS it proposes for recreational sports uses and emphasize the importance of maximizing existing fields through lighting and synthetic turf.

Description of Sports Growth is Incomplete

The body of the draft report provides data growth trends for sports groups, participants, and facilities demand. It describes growth for existing supports groups, small court sports, and senior activities. This is all valid data that informs our understanding of facility needs. What is left unsaid is how sports groups are ALREADY adapting to the increased demand as well as the sports user demands that are not met in Arlington at all because we lack appropriate or sufficient opportunities or facilities. Practice times have been reduced, the length of practices have been cut, registration is capped in some areas, and an unknown number of sports users engage in their sport outside of Arlington. More information is needed about THESE trends in order to better inform future facilities planning.

The Sports Commission recommends that the draft PSMP be modified to reflect the above conditions with respect to sports user demands.

Inconsistent Measurement of Diamond and Rectangular Sport Participation Growth

The case study on diamond fields states that diamond sport participation has grown by 2 percent since 2013, while rectangular sport participation has grown by 18 percent. However, these growth rates are inconsistent with and much lower than other growth data that DPR has provided to the Sports Commission. Such data shows that youth diamond sport participation grew by **22 percent** between 2013 and 2018 and youth rectangular sport participation grew by **35 percent**. To the extent that DPR used growth data to determine a future LOS for field needs, it is paramount that the correct data is used.

The Sports Commission recommends the following adjustments: (1) Reexamine and validate the diamond and rectangular sport participation growth data that was used in the diamond field case study and in setting the LOS for diamond and rectangular fields; (2) Add footnotes in the PSMP to clarify how DPR measures sport participation for all sports amenities and what participation data was considered (i.e., who or what was included, what are the specific numbers underlying growth rates); and (3) if incorrect numbers were used to set the diamond and rectangular field LOS, adjust the LOS as appropriate.

PSMP Should Clarify Limits of Needs Assessment Survey

A key part of the PSMP is the Needs Assessment Survey conducted for the County by the ETC Institute. However, the Sports Commission finds several limitations to the survey and believes these should be made clear in the PSMP. First, the survey collects residents' opinions about their needs and priorities and whether these are being met. These responses are precisely that – an opinion – and not a definitive source for understanding whether their needs are actually being met and whether future investments are needed.

Second, the distribution of survey respondents by age is out of alignment with Arlington’s population. This is important because public space needs vary by age group. Residents over the age of 55 represent 23% of the County’s population but comprised 43% of survey respondents. While paved walking and biking trails were the most important outdoor public space amenity for all age groups, the next two most important outdoor amenities for residents under 55 were playgrounds and rectangular fields, while those over 55 favored nature centers and hiking trails. **The misalignment between respondents and the overall population disproportionately emphasized the priorities of Arlington’s senior population over the priorities of the County’s younger residents.** This is problematic because the survey was used to determine the relative priority of public space amenities when setting the LOS.

Because this misalignment has not been clearly explained, residents have misinterpreted the survey results. Some residents have asserted that the public space amenities most desired by the community are trails, natural areas, and wildlife habitat, and that the community did not prioritize sports amenities. However, conclusions of this type are an oversimplified (at best) and possibly incorrect (at worst) reaction to the survey results.

The Sports Commission recommends that the PSMP make clear the strengths and weaknesses of the survey results as a tool for accurately assessing the public space needs of County residents and clarify (if needed) what additional steps were taken to adjust for any weaknesses, particularly in setting the LOS. Further, when the needs assessment survey is repeated in the future, DPR should ensure that the instrument is administered in a manner that appropriately captures variations in need by age group.

Objective Needs Assessments and LOS Standards Should Also Apply to Casual Use Spaces

Needs assessment and LOS are strong components of the PSMP for the purpose of identifying any realignment or future investments in Arlington’s public spaces. These have been applied to all existing indoor and outdoor public space amenities. However, this PSMP creates a new category of public space – casual use spaces – and new objectives for ensuring access to casual use space, increasing the amount of casual use space, including such spaces in future park master plans, and, conceivably, converting other types of space to casual use in the future.

Because this is a new category of public space use, the PSMP lacks any objective needs assessment or LOS to guide how much casual use space Arlington should have. The PSMP includes specific actions regarding casual use space, i.e., the County “will provide access”, but states the County will only “consider” creating a casual use space inventory or LOS. This approach is not consistent with the approach taken for all other public use spaces, in which the community’s needs were objectively assessed and a target LOS was applied. While the Sports Commission supports the overall direction the PSMP takes with respect to casual use space, it should be treated the same as every other public use space.

The Sports Commission recommends that the County commit to creating a casual use space inventory, LOS and needs assessment, and make explicit that decisions regarding casual use space will be based on assessment of demand, as the PSMP does for recreational and other space uses.

Decision-making Process for Lighting Fields or Converting to Synthetic Turf Is Not Clear

The Sports Commission applauds the decision to include in the PSMP specific criteria for converting grass fields to synthetic turf and lighting sports fields. It is heartening to see rankings for potential turf and lighting projects, given the lack of recent clarity about potential sites for such improvements and the public's general interest in knowing which facilities might get those types of enhancements. However, the PSMP stops short of explaining the actual process and schedule for using the rankings included in the report. We presume that, depending on the conditions for each site, some form of public process will be developed in which these decisions will be discussed. If so, that should be made explicit, as members of the community have concerns about how such decisions will be made and who might be able to weigh in on these decisions. There are also concerns about the timing of decisions.

The Sports Commission recommends that the draft PSMP clarify the process and schedule by which decisions will be made to convert or light fields.

Prioritizing Improved Coordination with APS to Maximize Availability & Stewardship of Public Spaces

The Sports Commission would like to stress the importance of this piece, which is part of Strategic Direction 4. Given the physical and fiscal constraints highlighted above and the sheer number of facilities that are APS-owned, many of which are maintained or partly maintained by DPR, improved coordination between the County and APS to maximize our entire inventory of public spaces is essential. It is well-established that the lack of coordination between APS and DPR / the County leads to inefficiencies and sub-optimal use and maintenance patterns. Within our fixed footprint, and recognizing the range of demands for public spaces, APS facilities must be leveraged to the greatest extent possible while still protecting the facilities and meeting school system needs.

The Sports Commission recommends that the elements within SD 4, Action 4.1 be elevated in importance; these are critical for the overall success of many of the aspirations of the PSMP. Additionally, the Sports Commission wishes to participate as a partner in some of the specific sub-elements (4.1.3 and 4.1.6).

Sports Commission comments and suggestions regarding specific PSMP elements

The Sports Commission has select comments and suggestions regarding certain recommendations from the final PSMP draft. They are presented below as an appendix.

Regards,

Shirley Brothwell
Chair, Sports Commission

Attachment

Appendix with comments and suggestions.

| Page | Section | Topic / Element | Sports Commission Comments & Suggestions |
|-------------|----------------|--|---|
| 55 | 1.1 | Add 30 acres of new public space | This is an ambitious aspiration and the Sports Commission fervently hopes that it can be realized. However, as with other aspects of the plan, we are likely to be constrained by costs and opportunities. The PSMP would benefit from acknowledging this reality and emphasizing that the community needs to seriously explore alternative ways of growing and sharing public spaces. |
| 58 | 1.1.7 | Decking over highways | Decking over roadways is one of a few ways that new space can be created (not just transitioned from one use to another). However, funding is likely to be an issue. The PSMP should explain how the County should prioritize between maximizing and maintaining existing spaces versus adding new spaces. |
| 58 | 1.2 | Use Levels of Service as a principal planning tool | We support the County’s desire for a common planning tool’s use across the entire plan. Using a population-based Level of Service provides a consistent approach throughout, particularly for amenities where use data is not available. |
| 60 | 1.2.4 | Updated info every five years | Regular updating of the PSMP is a must in order to serve changing and growing populations. In an HQ2 world, this becomes even more critical. It is essential to ensure that future assessments better match the proportion of respondents to residents. This is not the case with the current assessment (see below under Action Items). |
| 60 | 1.3 | Ensure access to casual use spaces | In the ongoing debate about the need for more casual use space, some parties are pushing for casual use space instead of or in place of playing fields. Collaboration and sharing (multi-use) is the direction for Arlington. Playing fields can serve as casual use spaces when not scheduled for sports uses. Playing fields are true multi-use spaces, not only in terms of the various sports activities supported but also in terms of the multitudes of other (casual) uses that those spaces host every year. |
| 61 | 1.4.2 | Build two new multi-use activity centers | The Sports Commission strongly favors adding two multi-use centers. The County lacks adequate capacity when it comes to most indoor sports activities. Adding two new activity centers, ideally designed in consultation with user groups, can start to address this challenge. Related point: As demand analyses are done and the centers are designed, any gaps between planned service increases and demand may at least partly be addressed by private facilities. The draft could recognize that not all indoor needs must be met through public facilities. |

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| 64 | 1.4.3 | Dedicated Pickleball courts | While we encourage increased capacity for playing pickleball (and other sports as well), dedicated facilities are luxuries we rarely can afford. The Sports Commission stresses the need for multi-use spaces. Multi-use sport courts could serve well as pickleball courts. We encourage the pickleball community to recognize and embrace this as other sports groups have done over the years. |
| 64+ | 1.5 + | Better use of existing spaces through planning and investment | We strongly support better use of existing amenities and facilities and plans in process. Let’s finish what we have started and optimize existing and new facilities so they provide maximum utilization across County residents. |
| 1.5.6 | 66 | Tennis courts | We encourage planning for proper maintenance or tennis courts (and all other facilities). We also stress the ability to use tennis courts for other sports as well (see pickleball note above). Going forward, multi-use facilities should be the norm. |
| 1.5.7 | 66+ | Park master plans | We strongly endorse the use of park master plans. Such processes should include appropriate inputs and considerations from the whole County as well as neighbors “hosting” the parks. Park users of all types should have influence on the plans. With this, we should recognize that we cannot serve every user group with every park; some parks can offer a wide variety of amenities and others will be fairly limited. |
| 1.5.8 | 67 | Zoning adjustments | Consider the approval of zoning amendments if they (a) facilitate increased use of an existing or planned park and (b) do not unduly burden County residents. |
| 1.5.10 | 67 | Rooftop play spaces | Rooftop play spaces are highly desirable for a dense area like Arlington. The illustration on page 66 of a playing field on top of a parking structure is an example of how such spaces could help maximize use of available space. However, this idea needs to move from concept to pilot: the County should look for an opportunity to test this idea to learn more about how to evaluate future implementation. |
| 1.5.15 | 69 | Database of privately-owned public spaces | Developing a database of privately-owned public spaces provides a greater sense of the shared assets that we have, and it lets us start tracking usage and determine appropriate levels of service related to those assets. Defining all of these types of spaces will be a challenge, but it is achievable. This list also memorializes these spaces so if a developer elects to re-purpose such a space, we can look back on the list and remind everyone about the agreed-upon definition of such spaces. This can keep us from losing such spaces over time. |

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| 1.6.4 | 72 | Permanent restrooms | The development of permanent, publicly accessible restrooms to support public recreational spaces is highly desirable and supported by virtually all sports user groups. It may be possible to grow some partnership with sports groups specifically focused on supporting the operation of such restrooms. |
| 4.1 | 110 | Work with APS to maximize availability of public spaces | Increased & improved collaboration and coordination with APS is a must in the coming years, as the anticipated population growth will increase the demand for recreational facilities. A coordinated approach to scheduling and resource management lets us get the most out of our resources. |
| 4.1.3 | 111 | Expand participation in planning for publicly-accessible amenities on APS property | School facilities are used by many, including some who are not part of the regular APS planning world. APS facilities are certainly multi-use facilities, and they are paid for by all County residents, so all involved should have their say. This supports the point above about maximizing availability. |
| 4.1.6 | 111 | Collaborate with APS to preserve resources when building new schools | Related to the point above – the entirety of the local and County-wide communities need to be kept in mind when we design new APS facilities. These spaces are true multi-use spaces – not just the buildings, but also the rest of the surroundings. A more holistic approach to planning will benefit more residents. |
| 4.3.2 | 114 | Partnerships to support projects in parks and public spaces | The Commission strongly encourages the development of this support structure. There are significant opportunities for community-based and corporation-driven partnerships that can help support existing facilities and provide much-needed funding (and other support) for new projects. Other municipalities have successfully leveraged such partnerships and developed mutually beneficial arrangements. |
| 4.3.4 | 114 | Sponsorship opportunities | Sponsorship is another tool that Arlington must explore to help defray costs and open up new opportunities. We must find an acceptable balance between aesthetic concerns and revenue generation. We must consider all avenues for making ends meet. |
| 4.4 | 115 | Support and strengthen the County's volunteer programs for public spaces | We support this effort; Arlington thrives in part due to volunteer work around the County. The County needs to more publicly acknowledge and recognize the many hours donated by volunteers and work more closely with them to achieve public goals. The County should seek input from current volunteers as this support structure is developed. |

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| 4.6.3 | 117 | Increase revenue generating uses in public spaces | As written, we presume this refers mainly to onsite concessions and similar opportunities. We support this as long as we are not talking about public spaces going to the highest bidder, displacing regular users, most of whom are County residents and taxpayers. |
| 5.1.1 (5.4 too) | 120 | Evaluate demand and adjust | The Sports Commission strongly supports this. We need a true and complete picture of demand. Unmet sports demand is prevalent, and this is not recognized or acknowledged by DPR and others in the community. For example, we lack data on the numbers of youth sports participants who practice their sport outside of Arlington due to inadequate opportunities inside the County. Involve user groups to obtain a more robust picture. |
| 5.1.5 | 120 | Increase drop-in opportunities | The County should commit to providing more drop-in sports opportunities and also ramp up its communication to the public concerning drop-in availability and locations (i.e., onsite signage with schedules, online calendars, set “open” hours). |
| 6.1 etc. | 126 | Ensure maintenance standards are clear | We wholeheartedly support this. Connected to this is the need for consistent and appropriate funding for maintenance. |
| 6.1.7 | 127 | Share maintenance with partner groups | In varying degrees, this is already happening. Perhaps this needs more public recognition. Diamond field user groups provide hundreds of hours maintaining fields each season, for example. Most rectangular playing fields are lined and maintained by other user groups, not by the County. Sports groups and teams routinely clean up field sites. |
| App. I | 134 | Casual use space | Casual use spaces are not necessarily exclusive, and they don’t always provide the stated benefits. Also, numerous casual use spaces exist when other uses at those locations are not in place (i.e. sports fields that are open for access when not scheduled for use, etc.). |
| App. II | 139+ | Land acquisition | In general, we support acquiring land to be used for parks purposes, whether to augment an existing park or develop a new park space. We recognize that the opportunities are limited and the costs considerable, and trust that land acquisition is not seen as a never-ending supply of opportunities for parks. |

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| App. II | 142 | <p>Part I: Alignment with other County plans - The site is identified within an existing approved park master plan.</p> <p>- The site is identified as future parkland in an adopted comprehensive plan element or sector, area, phased development site plan, or corridor plan.</p> <p>- The site is identified as future parkland in an existing neighborhood conservation plan.</p> | <p>We would like to see a comprehensive list of all these current and proposed sites in one consolidated list as a part of the POPS appendix.</p> <p>The County Board or County Manager need to take steps to assure that Parks Bond monies are spent on parks and not “Art Districts” or other non-Parks uses. While we appreciate the arts, we think that bonds approved specifically for parks purposes should be used for the stated purpose and not re-directed during a park planning process. These types of assurances can be made in the parks master plan process.</p> |
| App. II | 171+ | Level of Service | <p>Population-based standards are the most uniform and effective approach for a broad ranging plan as this. Note that demand data was also incorporated for some recreational amenities (p. 173). A deeper dive into demand (including discussions of unmet needs) via user group involvement can help.</p> |
| App. | 174 | <p><u>Diamond fields</u> - The Population based LOS is 1 field for every 5,153 residents.</p> | <p>The LOS was calculated based on an assumption of 43 diamond fields, but this number is a composite of diamond fields and combination fields where a dedicated diamond field counts as 1 and a combination field counts as ½. User groups believe that several other fields listed as diamond fields should instead be counted as combination fields, as they are not dedicated diamond-use fields and are shared with rectangular sports.</p> |

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| App. II | 183+ | Levels of Service cont'd | There are some disconnects between a population-based LOS approach and the illustrated access-focused LOS approach. We recognize that we cannot have all types of amenities in all locations, and for some types of facilities, grouping them in specific ways makes sense. At the same time, we currently have "facility deserts" in parts of the County. The PSMP should identify what facilities are needed where in order to eliminate such deserts. |
| App. III | 195+ | Synthetic Field & Lighting | We approve of the view stating the primary capacity vs. supply problem and encouraging alternative solutions. The criteria and rankings are encouraging. |
| App. III | 197 | Turf Criteria | Don't overlook the value of turf on smaller parcels / spaces as well (ex. School fields that get high usage, Rocky Run Park, etc.). Smaller scale does not necessarily mean proportionally higher costs. |
| App. III | 197+ | Turf Criteria | The Sports Commission encourages the use of turf as appropriate at drop-in field locations to provide longer service life of those surfaces. |
| App. III | 210 | Lighting Criteria | During the public input process, some commenters observed that lighting small parcels may be valuable, particularly if doing so increases opportunities for drop-in use. The Commission encourages flexibility in applying the lighting criteria so as not to exclude such opportunities. |
| App. III | 210+ | Lighting Criteria | We encourage the use of lights as appropriate at drop-in field locations to provide longer hours of use for community users. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | The timing for a large number of the action plans is "continuous" and many of these are the more expensive actions envisioned, however the plan is silent on the priority of certain actions relative to others. Funding has been tight in recent years and may not improve, therefore choices must be made. It's difficult to come away with any sense of which action items (i.e., anything that is not short term and affordable) should rise to the top of the list. A plan with no priorities is difficult to implement. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Use more active vocabulary for certain actions; overreliance on "consider" and "explore", which makes the plan extremely vague and nebulous. If there is a need to caveat, perhaps adding "where feasible" or "to the greatest extent practical" to more active verbs would be a better approach. |

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| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 1.2 – Using LOS as a planning tool: The Sports Commission supports a regular reassessment of public needs as called for in 1.2.4. We urge DPR to ensure that the proportion of respondents in the next assessment better match the proportion of residents in the County population (by age group, by income bracket, by race, etc.). As we have mentioned in the past, the proportionality of respondents by age group in the original survey are not representative of the County’s current population, which could distort the needs assessment and lead to incorrect planning decisions. The plan should note correlation between action 1.2 and action 5.1 (regularly evaluate program demand and adjust offerings). |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action item 1.5.4 – The way this action plan is phrased leaves the impression that conversion of grass fields to turf and adding lights are independent actions that will take place outside of the parameters of any park planning. Suggest DPR clarify the context in which these actions will occur. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action item 1.5.7 – Please add the Sports Commission as a potential partner |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action item 1.5.10 – DPR should, in the short term, identify a location where this could be tested even temporarily or on a pilot basis. Such testing could help DPR better understand the issues that might be associated with siting recreational amenities in this manner. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 4.1 – Working with APS to maximize availability of public spaces: The Sports Commission strongly supports all action items under this heading and urges DPR to make this action item a priority. APS facilities currently provide a significant portion of total sports capacity. Within our fixed footprint, and recognizing the range of demands for public spaces, APS facilities must be leveraged to the greatest extent possible while still protecting the facilities and meeting school system needs. Please add the Sports Commission as a potential partner for 4.1.3 and 4.1.6. |

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| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 4.3 – Establishing non-profit or umbrella foundations dedication to public space advocacy and fundraising: The Sports Commission strongly supports all action items under this heading. As the County continues to face tight budgets, it will no doubt encounter questions about how to fund certain amenities that are used only by a portion of the population. Sports user groups are community leaders in this regard, having shown a strong willingness and commitment to contribute funds to help achieve certain needed improvements that might not otherwise be funded. This model can serve other interest groups as well. Additionally, the Arlington Sports Foundation, in concert with sports user groups, has already fostered success in generating funding of sports facility projects. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 4.4 – support and strengthen the County’s volunteer programs: The Sports Commission applauds the inclusion of this action item. Volunteerism provides the County with a wealth of free resources to supplement budgeted resources. In the sports environment, for example, field users dedicate thousands of hours each year to taking care of rectangular and diamond fields. The Commission recommends that DPR develop some kind of mechanism to quantify these hours and estimate the value of this resource. Further, the County should more publicly recognize and appreciate these volunteers. DPR should add sports groups as potential partners under this action item. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 4.5 – securing funding to support development and maintenance of public spaces and ensure funds are efficiently and wisely spent: The Sports Commission strongly encourages augmenting the public spaces maintenance budget. Further, we urge the County to prioritize good maintenance of existing spaces over acquisition and development of new spaces. When we invest time and resources into development but do not match this with appropriate maintenance resources, facilities degrade over time and use falls off. It is paramount that Arlington take care of what it has already built. This ties strongly to Action 4.1 (partnering with APS). Maintenance of APS sports-related facilities needs to be evaluated and better understood (see action item 6.1.8) |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 4.6 – identify and pursue non-County funding sources: DPR should improve its reporting on funds received from non-County sources and how these funds are used. The PSMP should include an action item on conducting outreach to private funding sources as well. |

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| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 5.1 – regularly evaluate program demand and adjust: The Sports Commission supports the action items under this heading, and requests that it be listed as a potential partner for all items. The information gathered should be fed into the periodic assessment of public space needs. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 5.4 – The Sports Commission requests to be added as a potential partner for this item. |
| App. V | 259+ | Action Plan | Action 6.1 – ensuring maintenance standards are clear, consistent, and being met: The Sports Commission strongly supports items 6.1.1, 6.1.7, and 6.1.8. With respect to sports facilities, we suggest that DPR work with sports user groups to define maintenance standards. Further, DPR should report periodically to the Commission on the extent to which its maintenance standards are met and identify any facilities for which standards have not been met. |