

ENVIRONMENT AND ENERGY CONSERVATION COMMISSION
c/o Department of Environmental Services
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 705
Arlington, VA 22201

March 11, 2019

The Honorable Christian Dorsey, Chair
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: A Plan for Our Places and Spaces: Public Spaces Master Plan Update

Dear Chair Dorsey:

The Arlington County Environment and Energy Conservation Commission (E2C2) is submitting an additional letter regarding the Public Spaces Master Plan Update, based on the changes that have been made subsequent to the letter that we sent to the Board on January 25, 2019. We reiterate our earlier comments about the importance of this Master Plan, and about our appreciation for the commitment and engagement by Department of Parks and Recreation staff over the past three years. We similarly reiterate our recognition of the difficulties faced by County Staff in balancing the diverse interests of the community, which will only become more difficult with a growing population.

E2C2 would like to commend staff for their responsiveness to the comments we sent to the County Board last month, and we would therefore like to amend our previous comments with the updates provided below:

A. Level of Service (LOS):

As stated in our previous letter, E2C2 recommended that the “recommended LOS values” and “associated incremental amenity units needed” be removed from the PSMP Update. We recommended that these values be replaced with a goal to work collaboratively with a public advisory committee to develop an appropriate methodology and ultimately set these values in a transparent and community-supported way.

While we still support the above course of action, we appreciate the changes that Staff has made to this section of the PSMP Update. Specifically, language has been added to the LOS introductory text and the LOS table (Figure 27) clarifying that estimated future amenity needs are aspirational, and that there are ways to meet desired LOS goals without adding additional amenities (e.g., adding synthetic turf and/or lights to fields; dividing community garden plots). Staff has also added goals to analyze athletic field utilization to improve data on current use and assess future needs (priority action), and to explore how adding synthetic turf and/or lights to fields will affect the need for new fields as outlined in the LOS section. Accomplishing these goals will significantly improve the accuracy of projected future amenity needs for fields (until these goals have been achieved we continue to caution against relying on these values too heavily for planning and investment

purposes). We recommend that a public advisory committee be convened and consulted when “recommended LOS values” and “associated incremental amenity units needed” are being updated in 5 years time, to avoid similar controversy.

E2C2 also appreciates changes currently being made to the LOS table (Figure 27). Specifically, we approve of the separation of the baseline data from the subjective factors in Figure 27A, as well as the separation of these values from the estimated targets in Figure 27B. We would still prefer that “recommended LOS values” and “associated incremental amenity units needed” be provided separately from this static plan, in a location that could host revised values alongside all prior values to avoid confusion, but do feel that the changes being made are a significant improvement over the previous iteration.

E2C2 still believes that a full discussion of the Arlington County 2016 Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment Survey should accompany the “recommended LOS values.” At the very least, a full citation should be available to allow easy access, ideally accompanied by a hyperlink.

B. Casual Use Space

E2C2 strongly supports the inclusion of the new goal to “include intentionally designed casual use spaces where appropriate.” We would still like to see commitment to develop LOS for casual use spaces, however, or at least a disclaimer on Figure 27 confirming that “achieving the LOS of other amenities will not come at the expense of casual use spaces,” because we are concerned that without an associated LOS value casual use spaces might be converted into other amenities that have concrete recommended targets.

C. Green Space:

E2C2 continues to be concerned about the preservation of green space within the County. Although we appreciate and support implementation of the novel “casual use space” concept, the inclusion of hardscaped plazas within the definition means that protection and expansion of casual use spaces within the County will not necessarily address our concerns. We would strongly support development of a goal that X% of public spaces will be green or natural spaces, in order to ensure that County retains one of the amenities mostly highly valued by the community (according to the Arlington County 2016 Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment Survey).

D. Synthetic Turf and Lighting:

E2C2 is pleased that Staff has incorporated the “Williamsburg Lights” consensus factors into the lighting decisions. Although we had proposed that the prioritization criteria be amended to include the Williamsburg Lights criteria up-front, we understand that such an inquiry would be extremely burdensome and time-consuming, given the number of sites in play and the degree of judgment required to apply some of the Williamsburg factors. For that reason, we understand the proposal to limit that site-specific inquiry to a discrete number of “high-scoring” sites.

We appreciate that the scoring process has been outlined, and that Staff is working to link this process with Goal 1.5.5 which seeks to define a transparent civic engagement process for adding lights to athletic fields. We recommend that this process include the preparation of an environmental assessment (EA) for field lighting proposals.

Conclusion: We would again like to express our appreciation to County Staff for their responsiveness to our earlier comments. E2C2 supports the PSMP Update, but requests that the Board remain vigilant in protecting our casual use, green space, and natural areas, given the issues outlined above. We ask that the Board support Staff in both implementation and continued improvements post-adoption.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K Michael Hanna". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mike Hanna, Chair
Environment and Energy Conservation Commission