



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



March 4, 2019

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

Re: Request to Advertise the Public Spaces Master Plan (PSMP)

Dear Chairman Dorsey:

Slightly more than four years ago, Arlington County kicked off the Planning Our Public Spaces (POPS) process to develop a new Public Spaces Master Plan. The Sports Commission and sports user groups have been involved throughout the process. After extensive outreach, data collection, and stakeholder engagement, the PSMP is ready for the final stages of review and adoption. The Sports Commission believes the document articulates a comprehensive and thoughtful vision for meeting County residents' current and future public space needs and continuing to improve the health and vitality of our community. While we encourage the Board to approve the Request to Advertise, we do have concerns about certain aspects of the document.

Plan Contains Elements That Significantly Improve Understanding of Our Public Spaces

The PSMP contains several elements that significantly improve the community's understanding of current public spaces and help establish a baseline from which to engage in future planning.

First, the PSMP helps us understand various County demographics. For example, 28 percent of Arlington residents are millennials (ages 25 to 34), making them the largest age-based demographic in the County.¹ The PSMP discusses growth in sports activities and demand for sports capacity among youth, millennials, and seniors. These include sports that are new to Arlington (e.g., lacrosse, ultimate frisbee) and or that face increasing or decreasing participation rates (e.g., respectively, pickle ball, football). The document helps us better understand the quantity, size, and location of the parks, fields, courts, trails and other amenities that comprise our public space system. Of great import to the Sports Commission, the PSMP contains a

¹ The PSMP notes that Arlington has 77 percent more residents in this age bracket than the overall DC metropolitan area. Residents aged 35 to 44 years old comprise the next largest 10-year bracket at 16 percent of County residents.

complete list and map of all Arlington diamond, rectangular, and combination fields, as well as their lighting and ownership status (whether DPR or APS).

The plan introduces, for the first time, the concept of casual use space, including how such spaces might be used, how they should be defined, and what design characteristics they should include. The plan also introduces the concept of access-based levels of service, helping us understand what areas of the County are most in need of additional services.

All of this information helps us understand the County's configuration, how it's likely to change over time, and how we might create and adjust public spaces to meet our needs.

Sports Commission Supports Population-Based Level of Service Analysis

A fundamental goal of the PSMP is to anticipate Arlington's needs through 2035 as our population grows and changes. The projection is done using a population-based Level of Service (LOS) analysis, a proven and commonly-used approach for planning purposes. The approach has been the subject of much comment and consternation throughout the POPS process.

Constituents have interpreted the new LOS for their favored amenity as a win or a loss, depending on the extent to which the new LOS would increase Arlington's inventory of the amenity.² Commentary has also been directed toward the methodology itself and how the methodology was executed.

The Sports Commission supports the population-based LOS: it is a consistent way of estimating Arlington's future needs across all amenities and is a sound method as proven by its successful use in other cities. We also understand that the LOS is a planning tool and not a blueprint for construction of specific projects. The document makes clear the intent to continue to refine the approach, collect more data where possible, and reassess community needs over time.³ We support this approach.

We do **not** support removing certain amenities (fields) from the LOS analysis, as has been suggested most recently in an Arlington Civic Federation resolution, and subjecting them to a different process and methodology than is used for all other amenities. To do so would deviate from well-established planning practices and would open a Pandora's Box by introducing myriad variables to the planning process for this one amenity (fields).

Involve Field Users in Efforts to Improve Data on Field Utilization

Since the final draft PSMP in October, a new priority action has been added to analyze athletic field utilization to improve data on the current use and assess future athletic field needs. The

² Note that with two exceptions – playgrounds and tennis courts – the plan calls for increasing the number, size, or extent of all other amenities except casual use space, for which no LOS yet exists.

³ We encourage DPR to take every effort to ensure that the next Community Needs survey better aligns with Arlington's age demographics; the current survey results are heavily weighted toward older residents and under-represent millennials, the largest age-based demographic in Arlington.

Sports Commission supports this new action and plans to work closely with DPR on its implementation.

Current field utilization practices may not be well understood by non-field users and are likely not well-reflected in DPR's scheduling data. For example, using existing data, it may not be clear that field users have been steadily adjusting how they use fields to cope with increased demand by shortening games and practice times, creating larger teams (i.e., so as to have fewer teams), and using fields more densely for practices (i.e., multiple teams sharing fields resulting in each team having less space to work with). Scheduling adjustments made after fields are closed due to inclement weather are also not well understood.

The Sports Commission supports having data to help understand field usage. However, this must be done using the right data, collected in the right way, properly verified, analyzed using the correct assumptions, by those who best understand field usage. The Commission has already given some consideration to how such data might be developed and looks forward to working with DPR and the sports leagues to help carry out this priority action.

Data on Casual Use Space Needs and Capacity Must be Developed

The Commission supports the idea of defining and providing casual use space, but we strongly believe that casual use spaces must be placed on the same footing as other public space amenities. This is not yet the case. The Community Needs survey did not ask about the importance of or perceived need for casual use space. There are no national or peer city standards to help guide how much space Arlington might need. And, there is no LOS for this amenity, though the PSMP says one "may" be developed in the future. In other words, we have no idea how much casual use space we currently have, how much we should have, or how we would even go about determining those data points.⁴

Yet, despite this lack of data, the PSMP is quite emphatic in its embrace of casual use space: ensuring access to such spaces is one of 11 priority actions, and new public space plans will include intentionally designed casual use spaces where appropriate.

Our comments on the final draft PSMP identified the imbalance in treatment between casual use space and other public space amenities. The final document was strengthened to clarify that an inventory of casual use spaces would be undertaken, and the County will address the above data weaknesses by "exploring opportunities" to develop standards for casual use spaces.

Despite these changes, we still believe further changes are required; it is imperative all public space amenities be on an equal footing for future planning purposes. The lack of data on casual use needs and capacity stands in stark contrast to the new priority action to develop

⁴ We note that Arlington currently has 1,127 acres of natural lands within its public spaces inventory.

increasingly precise data on field usage.⁵ By failing to commit to develop a LOS for casual use spaces, the PSMP treats this amenity more favorably than all other existing amenities and undermines the very framework that it seeks to establish. Therefore, the Sports Commission recommends that the plan should include a firm commitment to expeditiously develop a LOS for casual use space.

Meeting Certain LOS Objectives Will Be Difficult; Balance and Compromise Will be Necessary

The Commission believes it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve the new LOS standards for certain amenities. The desired LOS for several amenities -- such as fields, trails, and natural lands -- can likely only be increased through land acquisition. The LOS for diamond and rectangular fields would require an additional 26 acres of new land. The LOS for natural lands would require several hundred acres of new land. Yet, the plan calls for just 30 acres of land acquisition over the next 10 years, which is roughly consistent with the amount of land acquired in the last 10 years. Thus, the plan implicitly and explicitly acknowledges there will not be enough land to achieve its objectives.

This reality must be taken into consideration as we move forward to implementation. We simply don't have, and likely won't ever have, enough public land to meet all of our community's needs and objectives. We have already seen increased scrutiny and tension over how we currently use our public spaces by constituents who feel their needs are not being met.

The most important norm moving forward will be a commitment to achieving balance among all users' needs and prioritizing facilities that can serve multiple objectives and users. Our Commission believes that multi-use facilities are an important way to achieve such balance. For example, courts should be striped to serve both tennis and pickleball, and fields should serve as casual use space when not being used by sports teams. It is only through cooperation and compromise that we can hope to meet the many demands of our community.

Synthetic Turf, Lights, and Better Maintenance Will Help with Field Needs

The Sports Commission enthusiastically supports the PSMP's approach for setting transparent criteria by which to evaluate Arlington's fields and determine the best candidates for adding lights and/or converting from natural grass to synthetic turf. Given the practical limitations identified above, synthetic turf and lights represent feasible ways of adding more field capacity without acquiring additional land. We support the addition of a new action step to incorporate such increased capacity when assessing field needs. We also appreciate the added clarity on the analysis and process by which fields will be evaluated for turf conversion and lights.

While we support civic engagement and would never oppose this approach for making community-based decisions, we feel compelled to share our concerns about the new action

⁵ This contrast is noteworthy, given community conversations that have taken place about decommissioning sports fields in order to create casual use space.

step on establishing a civic engagement process prior to installing new field lights. We hope and trust that these processes will not be used to find any and all possible ways of blocking the addition of field lights, as appeared to be the case at Williamsburg Middle School, and will focus instead on how, with appropriate mitigation measures, lights can be added in ways that are minimally disruptive to the surrounding area. We hope that the civic engagement process will ensure balance among immediate neighbors, others in the neighborhood, sport user groups and the overall community.

The Commission endorses sections of the plan that speak to working with APS to maximize availability and stewardship of public spaces and improving public spaces through clearly-defined maintenance standards. These are realistic and necessary means for making existing capacity more reliably available for use. It is well-established that poor coordination and communication between APS and DPR leads to inefficiencies and sub-optimal use and maintenance patterns. APS facilities must be leveraged to the greatest extent possible while still protecting the facilities and meeting school system needs. Further, setting clear maintenance standards for all public space amenities, regardless of ownership, will help direct resources toward areas of greatest need.

Arlington Needs to Get Serious About Siting a Multi-Use Athletic Center

One PSMP objective that we strongly encourage is the goal to find locations for two multi-use activity centers (MAC) to provide year-round access to indoor athletic courts and fields. TJ Community Center (TJCC), the closest thing we have to a multi-use center, serves myriad users and purposes every day of the week, hosting basketball, pickle ball, soccer, volleyball, badminton, and roller skating, along with an indoor track and fitness equipment. As a popular gathering spot where families and neighbors recreate together, TJCC demonstrates how beneficial a MAC would be for our community, providing additional sports capacity while preserving flexibility for how to use natural outdoor spaces.

The County made its first attempt to site a MAC at Long Bridge Park. However, in 2016 the Long Bridge Park Advisory Committee (LBPAC) recommended decoupling the proposed MAC from the aquatics facility to provide more flexibility in designing the pool and fitness center within fiscal constraints. The LBPAC speculated that “indoor sports and recreation needs to be served by a MAC might be met more economically, and sooner, at another location” and suggested the Board direct staff to explore possibilities.

Three planning processes offer(ed) opportunities for siting at least one MAC: (1) Four Mile Run Valley and Jennie Dean Park; (2) the Buck site; and (3) the Carlin Springs site. But, a MAC has not been seriously considered at any of these locations. Properties that were acquired to expand park and recreation capacity in Jennie Dean Park were subsequently removed from the planning area in deference to the art and business communities. The Buck and Carlin Springs sites are thus far seen as possibly accommodating APS classrooms, various types of equipment and vehicle storage, and other needs.

The Sports Commission believes the County should be serious about siting at least one MAC. We are therefore disappointed that the PSMP has recently been weakened in this area, shifting from a charge to “identify” possible locations to merely continuing “exploring” possibilities. We are concerned that exploration will not yield better results than what has already occurred.

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The Sports Commission appreciates the careful thought, robust planning and hard work that has gone into getting the PSMP ready for the Board vote and follow-on implementation. We applaud the POPS Advisory Group and DPR for their leadership and steady community engagement throughout the planning process to create a plan that balances many interests. The Sports Commission looks forward to the PSMP’s approval so we can all focus on the important work of implementation.

Sincerely,



Shirley Brothwell, Chair
Sports Commission

Cc: Arlington County Board
Arlington Planning Commission
Mark Schwartz, County Manager
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation