



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



April 9, 2019

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

Re: Final Draft of the Public Spaces Master Plan

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 (PSMP). The Sports Commission and sports user groups have been involved throughout the process. 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. We support adoption of the PSMP.

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. It helps us understand our demographic footprint, which is important for understanding the community's current and future public space needs.¹ The PSMP discusses growth and change in sports activities and demand as well as the quantity, size, and location of the parks, fields, courts, trails and other amenities that comprise our public space system. 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 Sports Commission supports the population-based LOS: it is a consistent way of estimating Arlington's

¹ The PSMP notes that Arlington has 77 percent more residents in the millennial 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.

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.² We support this approach.

Involve Field Users in Efforts to Improve Data on Field Utilization

The Sports Commission supports efforts to improve data on current and future athletic field needs. Current field utilization practices may not be well understood by non-field users, such as changes that field users have already made to cope with increased demand that are likely not well-reflected in the Department of Parks and Recreation's (DPR) scheduling data. Field utilization must be assessed 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. There are no national or peer city standards to help guide how much space Arlington might need, and actual or perceived community needs have not been assessed. 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. This stands in stark contrast to the expectation for increasingly precise data on field usage.³ While we support the concept of casual use space, we caution against rushing to dramatically increase such spaces without first developing a more robust understanding of current needs and capacity.

Meeting Certain LOS Objectives Will Be Difficult; Balancing Needs Will be Necessary

The Commission believes it will be extremely difficult if not impossible to achieve the new LOS standards for certain amenities. The plan calls for just 30 acres of land acquisition over the next 10 years, but sets out aspirational goals that call for several hundred new acres of public land. 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. 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.

² 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.

³ This contrast is noteworthy, given community conversations that have taken place about decommissioning sports fields in order to create casual use space.

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 reasonable ways of adding more field capacity without acquiring additional land. We hope and trust that the criteria and the civic engagement processes laid out in the PSMP will be pursued in good faith as a way to add field capacity where feasible and appropriate. We also strongly support taking steps to set clear maintenance standards for all public space amenities, whether owned by the County or APS, to help direct resources toward areas of greatest need.

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

The Commission strongly encourages identifying locations for one or more multi-use activity centers (MAC) to provide year-round access to indoor athletic courts and fields. We are pleased to see the renewed commitment in the PSMP to undertaking this assessment and moving one step closer to making the much-needed MAC into a potential reality. We believe that building a MAC would help address a wide range of athletic capacity needs while preserving outdoor space for other uses.

=====

The Sports Commission appreciates the careful thought and hard work that has gone into developing the PSMP. 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