



June 28, 2021

Honorable Matt de Ferranti, Chair
Arlington County Board
Ellen M. Bozman Government Center
2100 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Nature Center improvements and open space acquisition

The Forestry and Natural Resources Commission would like to express two strong concerns with the recently released Capital Improvement Plan (CIP). The first is the lack of support for Arlington County's two Nature Centers. The second is the failure to move forward with what Arlington County has claimed to be one of its top priorities—the acquisition of more open space and natural areas.

Beyond those two concerns, the FNRC also urges the County to put a formal value on all the services and benefits that are provided by parks, natural areas, open spaces, and natural resources, and include that value as “Natural Capital” in the County's capital budget.

To take the Nature Center issue first, both the Gulf Branch Nature Center and the Long Branch Nature Center have been woefully neglected. In the last decade, no money has been allocated for updating the centers. A lot of the exhibits date back to the 1960s, more than a half-century ago. Yet, the pandemic has reinforced the value of the Nature Centers, with visits climbing as families seek out safe, healthy activities that reinforce the importance of nature and our connection to the natural world.

The FNRC thus strongly backs the recommendation of the Friends of the Gulf Branch Nature Center for a modest investment of \$750,000 for each of the two centers. That relatively small amount of money would represent a major opportunity to offer educational programs and exhibits to help our citizens better appreciate nature and the benefits and vulnerabilities of our ecosystem. Without this foundational awareness, many of the more global advocacies, such as energy conservation and environment, are less able to meet individuals on a personal, daily basis. Investment in our Nature Centers facilities and capabilities is essential as part of the County's campaign to connect residents with our urban ecology and to build even more support for the natural environment that makes the County a special place to live.

The second issue is more challenging, but even more important. Arlington County made a vital and correct decision 16 years ago, when the County's 2005 Public Spaces Master Plan gave top priority to acquiring 30 acres of land over the ensuing 10 years for parks and other open spaces and natural areas.

Unfortunately, the County fell far short of that 30-acre goal, even though property values were lower during those years than today.

Now, the 2019 Public Spaces Master Plan contains the same top priority. But the sad truth is that the County has not actually lived up to its promises to make open space acquisition a top priority. FNRC members are extremely concerned that, like so many other long-term goals, land acquisition is getting lost in an annual budget process that focuses on more immediate needs.

Yes, acquiring more land for parks and natural areas is expensive. But it should be viewed not as a cost, but as a crucial investment in the future. One key reason for Arlington's success and attractiveness has been its support and commitment to parks and natural spaces, earning it accolades like the #4 ranking in the entire country on the Trust For Public Land's Parkscore.

But the County cannot rest on its laurels. Our population is growing—and the amount and quality of our open space must grow as well if we are not to lose the qualities that make the County an attractive place to live and that also are vital for continued long-term economic growth. Parks and open space raise property values, improve health and quality of life, reduce the urban heat island, and cut pollution, among many other benefits.

The acquisition of more open space for parks and other natural areas becomes even more crucial as moving forward with other Arlington priorities results in some losses of natural areas. For example, the proposed boathouse in Roslyn will offer major benefits to County residents, and especially the vibrant rowing community, by providing more valuable access to the Potomac River. But it will inevitably lead to the loss of a certain amount of currently vegetated natural area. The FNRC thus urges the County to make up for that loss with acquisitions elsewhere in the County.

It's also clear that Arlington residents are fully behind the importance of acquiring land for parks, especially natural parks, as seen in survey data from both the 2019 PSMP and the Forestry and Natural Resources Master Plan, currently under development. Without investing now and without recognizing that natural capital is a legitimate and critical element in Arlington's future, we are mortgaging the future of the County.

So as part of the consideration of the current year Capital Improvement Plan proposal, the FNRC recommends the following specific actions:

- Create a land fund with multi-year authority that will allow flexible and rapid responses to available and suitable land purchases.
- Examine and calculate the full value of public land, especially natural land, with regard to public use, stormwater mitigation, tree canopy, and concomitant benefits mitigating heat island impacts and air quality, and the promotion of biodiversity and the values about nature that accompany the commitments of the Biophilic Cities Resolution of December 2019. The value of all those natural resources and their benefits then should be considered as "Natural Capital" as part of the County's

capital budget—and the County should work to increase that Natural Capital, just as it now works to improve the built environment in the capital budget.

- Ensure that the FNRC and other interested parties can strongly participate in the planning process for the proposed Roslyn boathouse to maximize and enhance the value of the natural resources surrounding the boathouse and its accompanying facilities on the boathouse site. In addition, make every effort to replace any loss of open space from the boathouse project by acquiring open space elsewhere in the County.
- Provide supplemental funding for county infrastructure projects of all kinds (transportation, stormwater, public facilities and negotiations with developers regarding publicly accessible private spaces) in order to maximize the multiple benefits of our existing and future public lands and to grow the County’s “Natural Capital.” One example is the opportunity to enhance public accessibility to the Ballston Pond Stormwater Project, which has the potential to be a nature park, a biodiversity lab, and a public education resource.

In recent years, and particularly during the pandemic, we have recognized the value of natural parks and natural habitat for the many biophilic benefits that they provide, as well as the conservation value that they bring to our county in general. We also witnessed what overuse, abuse based on ignorance (or malice) and underinvestment in ecological quality can do to our small and precious natural habitats. These are the habitats of native flora and fauna; but they are also the habitats of thousands of Arlingtonians, who both appreciate and sometimes take for granted their quality and very existence. FNRC members believe we must take the care of our spaces, especially our public natural spaces, seriously when we consider CIP decisions. If we fail to support, nurture, and expand them now, we will, in the long run, pay a serious price for that neglect.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our views.

Sincerely,



Phil Klingelhofer, Chair
Forestry and Natural Resources Commission

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