



March 24, 2023

Honorable Christian Dorsey, Chair
Arlington County Board
Ellen M. Bozman Government Center
2100 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: 2024 Department of Parks and Recreation Budget Proposal

Summary: The FNRC strongly recommends making permanent the one-time increases in FY 2024 for tree maintenance and for invasive species control, adding funding to restore full Nature Center hours, creating a specific program to increase the biodiversity and ecological value of our crucial parks and natural spaces, and living up to the County's commitment to acquire new land for parks.

Dear Chair Dorsey:

The Forestry and Natural Resources Commission thanks the Department of Parks and Recreation for briefing the FRNC on DPR's proposed FY 2024 budget. In response, the Commission would like to make three key points:

1) The Commission is especially encouraged by the one-time increases in the proposed budget for tree maintenance (\$300,000) and for invasive species removal (\$100,000). Arlington's urban forest and other natural spaces are crucial to the quality of life for all County citizens, providing such immensely valuable benefits as reducing air pollution, controlling stormwater runoff, tamping down urban heat, and reducing energy bills.

Maintaining those natural assets is vital. It's obviously far more cost effective and beneficial to carefully maintain and nurture the many thousands of existing large, mature trees in the County, instead of letting them succumb to early unnecessary deaths. Failing to provide proper maintenance would result in the additional expense of planting of new trees that will take decades to provide the same benefits as their mature predecessors.

Similarly, removing invasive plants is essential to the health of our forests and natural areas. Not only are invasive plants an eyesore in our parks, they also weaken and even strangle mature trees, while suppressing the growth of beneficial native plants. Removing those invasive species and encouraging the spread of native plants brings

major gains in forest health, biodiversity, beauty, and the quality of people's experiences in County parks.

The FNRC commends Arlington County staff for the considerable efforts they have already made to remove invasives and restore park habitats. The new FY 2024 funding for both tree maintenance and invasive species control will enable the County to significantly ramp up those efforts, speeding the County down a path to a better, more diverse, and healthier future for our forests and parks. Such efforts are also complementary to the goal of enhancing the County's natural capital that has been included in DPR's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for Fiscal Years 2023-2032.

But the FNRC fears that this momentum—and all the future potential benefits—will be lost if the funding is not renewed in FY 2025 and subsequent years. The Commission believes it is critical that those levels of funding for tree maintenance and invasive species control be made permanent. Indeed, the funding should not be viewed as a cost, but as an investment that will pay dividends many times over in years and decades to come in terms of benefits and reduced costs later.

2) In both its Public Spaces Master Plan and draft Forestry and Natural Resources Plan, the County discusses the importance of educating County residents about the natural world and the many benefits it provides. So, it's especially unfortunate and sad that the County has been failing to adequately support one of its most effective tools for education—the Nature Centers. Both the Gulf Branch Nature Center and the Long Branch Nature Center have been woefully neglected, with many exhibits dating back to the 1960s. Even worse, the Nature Center hours also have been drastically reduced. County residents report that they are visiting the Nature Centers even less than would be predicted from the shorter hours alone, since an inconsistent schedule of hours that vary each day leaves people confused about when the Centers might be open, seriously reducing the number of drop-in visits. The FNRC also notes that the Nature Centers are free to the public, so they are especially valuable for many County residents.

At a minimum, the County should: 1) set permanent hours that include some days with evening hours, so families can count on being able to visit the Nature Centers after school or work; and 2) restore a full-time manager for the Gulf Branch Nature Center, which would cost about \$115,000 per year.

Beyond that, the FNRC supports the recommendation of the Friends of the Gulf Branch Nature Center for a modest investment of \$750,000 for each of the two centers to upgrade or expand facilities, educational programs, and exhibits. This is another expenditure that should be viewed as an investment in the future instead of just a current cost, since it will pay off many times over in the form of stronger support for nature and the ecosystem that improves the quality of life in the County, even as the County's population grows. If the County fails to support and nurture the Nature Centers now, we all will pay a serious price for that neglect.

3) The FNRC also urges the Department of Parks and Recreation to work harder to increase the biodiversity and ecological value within existing parks and open spaces. FNRC is pleased to note that the County, with the help of Tree Steward volunteers, has already been experimenting with innovative practices like the Miyawaki Forest, in

which a diverse mix of trees is planted close together to maximize density, beauty, and habitat value. The many benefits include more homes for birds and insects, more opportunities for pollinators, healthier soils, and a more interesting landscape for park visitors.

Now is the time either to create a specific program aimed at increasing biodiversity and ecological value or to issue a directive to staff to explicitly incorporate goals for increased ecological value in their planning and operations. The County could transform barren swaths of grass into vibrant and diverse meadows, full of pollinators and other wildlife. It also could work with power companies to plant gardens or small understory trees under or near utility lines, creating valuable habitat that didn't exist before.

Such an effort is especially important now as invasive species control ramps up. The more progress the County makes in removing invasive species, the greater the opportunity to remake all our parks and natural areas with stunning and diverse assemblages of native plants and trees in all their natural glory. Investing now would bring lasting gains.

4) Both Arlington County's original 2005 Public Spaces Master Plan and the 2019 PSMP update set a goal of acquiring 30 acres of land for parks and other open spaces and natural areas. That goal is strongly supported by Arlington residents, as seen in survey data from both the 2019 PSMP and the Forestry and Natural Resources Master Plan and becomes even more important as County population grows.

Yet the County Board has almost completely failed to take meaningful action towards the goal, despite efforts by the Department of Parks and Recreation to identify and bring to the Board's attention possible lots for acquisition. It is hard to overstate how serious this lack of action is to the future of the County and the health and well-being of County residents. Even small "pocket parks" (of just a lot or two in size) can be immensely important in increasing ecological value and diversity and in offering nearby residents new places for recreation, solace, and healthful connection to the natural world. Studies show that such new parks will even increase the desirability of surrounding neighborhoods.

We can no longer allow the relentless pursuit of more and more redevelopment (and more and more tax revenue) to overshadow one of the most important steps that the County can take to ensure a better future for all residents. As with the FNRC's other recommendations, greater investments in parks and open space acquisition now would pay major dividends for decades to come, ensuring that Arlington could maintain its high rankings as both a Tree City and as one of the most desirable places to live in the United States.

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