

Via email

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

RE: Park and Recreation Commission Comments on the County Manager's Proposed CIP

Dear Chair Garvey:

The Park and Recreation Commission (PRC) reviewed the County Manager's proposed Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) dated May 28, 2024, for the ten years from 2025 to 2034, and provides the following comments. We look forward to further discussion at the work session on June 11 at 3:00 pm.

Summary

In brief, with respect to the budget for the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) we are pleased with the County Manager's proposal to provide funding to address environmental issues and resiliency, but request more funding be made available for parkland acquisition, especially in the near term. We are very pleased with the continuation of the "natural resiliency" funding and request that preservation of natural capital be a clearly articulated goal for this, and indeed for all aspects of park work. In this regard, there should be far more funds provided for large-scale non-native invasive plant removal given the devastating impact these plants are having on the health of our parkland. We note with approval the park Master Plan and are pleased to see inclusion of equity scores in County decision-making. We are pleased with the budget's continued program of trail and bridge maintenance and field maintenance.

With respect to the budget for the Department of Environmental Services (DES) which impacts upon parks, we highlight the importance of coordination among County departments to comprehensively address climate change. Thus, we recommend increasing the budget for Storm Water Quality and Concept Design to deliberately enhance and protect parks' environmental services, natural capital assets, in the DES planning process. We are very dismayed that the program for Green Streets is slated for reduction as we view this, and other uphill catchment systems, as an important tool for addressing erosion in park streams. We support the Gulf Branch Resiliency Project, especially the four downstream Green Streets projects associated with that project; but we remain concerned about the Lubber Run Watershed Capacity Improvements and the proposal to put an underground vault at Woodlawn Park, to the

Commission Members

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potential detriment of this natural area that provides a measure of stormwater and other environmental services.

With respect to the budget for Public and Government Facilities, we note with approval the proposed Virginia Hospital Center's behavioral wellness facility to be constructed next to Long Branch Nature Center if certain park-related concerns are addressed; the study of the Lee Community Center; and the installation of Electric Vehicle Charging Stations to support expansion of the County's use of electric tools and vehicles.

Detailed Comments on DPR Budget

Parkland Acquisition. We note favorably the long-term increase in funding for parkland acquisition, but the near-term amount of only \$1.5 million covering all of FY 2025 and FY 2026, or an average of only \$750,000 per year, is not enough "ready money" for the County to be able to act quickly when a desirable property becomes available. Much more funding should be allocated to this line item so that the County is in a good fiscal position to purchase lands as they become available. Acquisition of thirty acres of parkland is recommended by the Public Spaces Master Plan (PSMP) and has been a consistent priority in the PRC Work Plan for many consecutive years. Moreover, Arlington citizens identified "land acquisition for parks" as a very high priority within the parks and recreation budget area through the public engagement survey. We cannot overstate how important this item is to us and Arlington County citizens. Between 2019 and 2024, the County acquired an average of less than four acres of parkland per year. The proposed budget would make maintaining that average extremely unlikely. We encourage the County to continue its program of prioritizing public space acquisition in site plan negotiations. Fulfillment of the thirty acres vision in the PSMP, however, will require significantly more funding than the \$1.5 million that has been budgeted in the near-term.

Equity. We are pleased to see the prior CIP plans to renovate Gunston Park, Douglas Park, Jennie Dean Park, Monroe Park, and Doctors Run Park are in progress and nearing completion. We were also pleased with the DPR presentation's emphasis on equity for the park renovations chosen to be included in the CIP. The emphasis on equity should be explained, showing the degree to which equity bears on decisions. With climate change bearing down, it should be a high priority to place parks in areas with low tree canopy and heat island effect.

Natural Capital. We are pleased that the concept of "natural capital" continues in this CIP with the proposed funding for a "natural resiliency program." We are particularly mindful of the County's efforts to achieve bonding for such projects and appreciate the County taking deliberate steps to ensure that bonding for natural capital projects is successful. We look forward to enhancement of this funding in coming years. The proposal indicates that the natural resiliency "work may include forest restoration, stream improvements, large scale invasives removal, implementation of biophilic principals, etc." We certainly support all these concepts as high priorities, especially large-scale invasive plant removal that has been sorely underfunded in the operating budget. We have numerous acres of parkland that are overwhelmed by non-native invasive plants that have effectively destroyed the natural environment. As discussed in more detail below, we recommend that this funding be used in concert with storm water projects such

as the Gulf Branch Stream Restoration to further such Department of Environmental Services (DES) efforts to address the ever-worsening storm water runoff problem.

Nevertheless, we appreciate the unstated, but apparent, recognition that our natural resources need care and capital expenditures to continue to provide the important benefits of increased property values, better health outcomes, reduced heating and cooling costs, and mitigation of climate change impacts. We would prefer to see a high priority placed on this concept and a clear endorsement of the value of treating our “green assets” as valued infrastructure in need of care and attention through a capital budget.

Master Plan. In general, we support the focus on working to maintain our current parks’ natural spaces and facilities while following up on previous and ongoing capital improvement commitments to the community. We are pleased to see the proposed funding for the time sensitive part of the Arlington Boathouse project. We are hopeful that this project, which partners with the National Park Service (NPS), will present the opportunity to further this partnership to remove invasive plants that are destroying the trees and natural capital of the Arlington Potomac shoreline owned by NPS but affecting the quality of life of Arlingtonians. We are pleased with the emphasis on funding PSMP priorities, especially three urban parks and three parks in Crystal City and Gateway Park. We are pleased with the creativity associated with the “Emerging Uses Program” to make sure County investments stay in touch with the changing preferences and needs of our community.

Trail and Bridge Modernization. PRC is very pleased that the County is undertaking this work to invest in its trails and bridges used by pedestrians and cyclists for both recreation and transportation. We are satisfied with the request for increased funding for this project and support its ongoing implementation schedule.

Detailed Comments on Other Budget Areas that Impacts Parks

Certain items of concern to PRC appear in “park adjacent” areas of the CIP, underscoring our constant refrain about the need for coordination between the various departments within the County.

Stormwater Maintenance Capital. Budget spending for the **Four Mile Run Pollution Control Flood Wall** is supported by the PRC, and by the Four Mile Run Conservancy, as this Corps of Engineer Project will help protect the stream and adjacent park from sewage leakage in the event of future expected sea level rise. PRC supports replacement of the **Military Road Culvert at Gulf Branch** to avoid flooding the pump station building, in conjunction with the Gulf Branch Stream Resiliency project.

Stormwater Infrastructure/Capacity Improvements. PRC remains concerned about the Lubber Run Watershed Capacity Improvements as they may impact **Woodlawn Park**. PRC is concerned that the hard work of dedicated volunteers, including Bill Thomas Awardee, Beth Kiser, who is Park Steward of Woodlawn Park, is not upended by the construction of a proposed water detention vault. We should research every alternative means possible to maintain existing green infrastructure while addressing storm water runoff, a very serious issue in Arlington. Gray

infrastructure such as vaults seem more appropriately placed in areas that are already built environment, such as under parking lots, and not in natural areas.

Stormwater Streams and Water Quality Program. PRC is dismayed that the **Green Streets** funding is reduced from the prior CIP and requests that this funding be restored to the level of prior years, prioritizing green streets projects and similar uphill catchment and infiltration projects that protect park streams by capturing water before it reaches the streams. Green Streets projects can significantly reduce stormwater runoff, very often from flowing directly into parks. In keeping with the Forestry and Natural Resources Plan (FNRP) call for enhanced civic engagement, we suggest a directed program encouraging private landowners near parks to be trained in providing catchment and plantings that serve the same purpose as Green Streets.

PRC continues to strongly support the **four Green Stream Projects associated with the Gulf Branch Stream Resiliency Project**. PRC continues to support, with some pointed suggestions, the **Gulf Branch Stream Resiliency Project**, and would support additional Green Streets projects upstream and downstream from the project.

PRC also recommends enhanced funding for the **Storm Water Quality Study and Concept Design** to incorporate study and design of the ways and means County parks and the parks' streams can be recognized in the County's overall stormwater management planning, including prioritizing retention of natural areas. The twin goals would be to recognize and enhance the natural stormwater catchment and infiltration services provided by natural areas in parks (along with other services such as heat island mitigation); as well as to help preserve and protect streams in parks from erosion and tree damage while addressing stormwater runoff issues.

Public and Government Facilities. Regarding the budget for Public and Government Facilities, PRC is interested in the proposal related to a new **behavioral wellness facility** to be located next to Long Branch Nature Center. PRC is supportive of the opinions, expressed by the neighbors, that the "green zone" near the new facility be annexed to Long Branch Nature Center; that nature center upgrades should focus on the behavioral wellness benefits of nature; that an interpretive display honoring the unique Moses-Ball Spring be developed and that cultural and ecological restoration of the spring be assessed; and that the entire area be adequately treated for invasive plants. PRC was pleased to note that the mention of demolition of the **Lee Community Center** is incorrect, and PRC supports the funding for studying future uses of the site. PRC supports proposed funding for **energy efficiency and EV infrastructure charging stations** to support the County's conversion to electric vehicles and power tools as we have advocated in the past.

We appreciate the hard work and dedication evidenced by this proposed CIP. Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jill M. Barker". The signature is written in a dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Jill M. Barker
Chair – Park and Recreation Commission

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