



Park and Recreation Commission
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 414
Arlington, Virginia 22201



March 14, 2023

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

RE: Parks and Recreation Commission Comments on the County Manager's Operating Budget

Dear Chair Dorsey,

The Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) reviewed the County Manager's proposed budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 and provides the following comments.

In brief, we are pleased with the County Manager's emphasis on invasive plant control and attention to tree maintenance and planting, but would like to see more funds directed toward securing healthy and abundant trees and the creation of natural areas. We continue to hold the view that continued under-staffing of the County's nature centers is detrimental to the public, especially those living in Arlington's heat islands. We also seek reassurance that the proposed reductions in supplies and equipment does not impact prior plans to convert to entirely electric hand tools and motorized equipment and away from gasoline powered tools.

Conservation and Interpretive Staff Increase

As requested in FY2023, the PRC reiterates its request that two additional Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff positions be added to operate the nature centers at Gulf Branch and Long Branch for more hours, yet in compliance with the two-county-staff rule. The proposed budget, at page 655 describes a projected increase in visitors to the nature centers and to Fort C.F. Smith Park from last year and the year before, but visitor levels are expected to stay below levels in FY2019, the last year the nature centers were fully opened. The impact of reduced hours at the nature centers falls inequitably upon low-income persons and persons living in Arlington's heat islands -- areas with lower tree canopy and natural landscape. Accessing nature benefits both children and adults, improving physical health as well as mental well-being. Without nature center staff providing education and a safe welcome, these wooded areas are less accessible to persons truly needing these nature oases. Please consider fully reopening the nature centers so that all of Arlington's residents can reap the benefits of the outdoors.

Mitigation of Invasive Plants

We are pleased that the County manager has proposed an increase of \$100,000 (one-time only) to the invasive plant removal program. The budget at page 653 explains that this amount will allow an

additional 50 acres of County land to go into “active management”. While one-time funding is an improvement, ongoing funding would allow the most optimal, cost-effective invasive removal strategy. The budget states: “with one-time funding[,] more acres are treated aggressively that only require one treatment; any increase in ongoing funding would result in fewer acres, but the ability to treat more complex areas multiple times.” The PRC is pleased that the County manager has prioritized invasive plant management but encourages the County to consider increasing the ongoing funding so that more acres can be transferred to the “active maintenance” category sooner, reducing the need for aggressive treatments in the future. To the extent that this program preserves trees, justification for its increase is set forth in the paragraph below, as well.

Tree plantings and tree maintenance increases

PRC is pleased with the proposals to increase spending for tree maintenance (\$300,000) and for tree planting (\$100,000 from the stormwater fund), but greater budget expenditures are justifiable. According to the County manager’s budget notes (p. 653) DPR cares for approximately 100,000 park trees and 19,500 street trees, which amounts to approximately 16% of the 755,000 total Arlington trees on private and public property. Arlington’s trees collectively provide \$5.6 million per year in carbon sequestration, pollution, and stormwater runoff benefits. (Id.) The capital value of these trees, should they need to be replaced with trees of the same quality, is approximately \$1.38 billion. (Id.) While PRC is pleased with the decision to increase the operating and maintenance expenditures on County trees, the increased wealth and well-being provided to our citizens justifies even greater expenditure to ensure the ongoing health and abundance of Arlington’s tree canopy. Preservation and protection of trees from invasive plants, as discussed above, is important to ensure our trees are thriving, rather than struggling against English ivy, porcelain berry, oriental bittersweet and other vines that routinely contribute to the death of trees in our area. Greater consideration should be given to increasing the budgets for both the invasive plant removal program and to the tree planting/maintenance program to guard, protect and preserve Arlington’s trees.

Other areas for future focus

The estimated expenditure of only \$20 million on park and recreation planning, design and construction is inadequate to the county’s significant needs. This is not only far below the expenditures that included Long Bridge and Mosaic Parks in the recent two years, but it is only 83% of the amount spent in FY2019 (pre-pandemic).

The PRC is concerned that there is no clear budgetary discussion about construction, repair and maintenance of trails by DPR. There are numerous areas needing trail repair and improvement, and we would like to see money and staff time devoted to this.

It is wonderful that all 83 playgrounds will be inspected two times during the year, as required, and that 15 park shelters/restrooms will be preventively maintained. However, we note that only 15 tennis/basketball courts will be maintained/resealed, rather than the 27 that the County sets as its annual goal. This is particularly problematic considering the significant controversy over the use of these courts for both tennis and pickleball.

There is a substantial increase in home gardening and in residents seeking gardening information. There are long waiting periods for residents to be granted community gardening plots. The proposed number of community garden plot holders (413) is inadequate and should be increased.

PRC appreciates recognition in the Public Spaces master Plan and other associated resolutions and plans that our parks and natural spaces are highly valued, highly valuable, and highly vulnerable.

We support continued and enhanced investment in the viability and quality of these important natural assets.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shruti Kупpa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Shruti Kупpa
Chair – Park and Recreation Commission

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