

March 29, 2024

Honorable Libby Garvey  
Chair, Arlington County Board  
2100 Clarendon Blvd., Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201

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

Dear Chair Garvey and County Board Members,

The Park and Recreation Commission (PRC) reviewed the County Manager's proposed budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 and provides the following comments.

We continue to hold the view, as we have for the last two years, that under-staffing of the County's nature centers is detrimental to the public, especially those living in Arlington's heat islands, and diminishes the ability of the nature centers to serve the environmental education components of the newly adopted Forestry and Natural Resources Plan ("FNRP"). We are pleased with the County Manager's emphasis on invasive plant control and attention to tree maintenance, two very important investments required to maintain Arlington's "natural capital". We encourage the County to adopt a climate action plan to promote coordinated climate resilience strategies in all departments, and we especially encourage collaboration among the Department of Parks and Recreation ("DPR") and the Department of Environmental Services ("DES") to preserve, protect and expand Arlington's tree canopy to help control excessive stormwater and erosion that threatens existing trees in our parks. We are extremely pleased with the news that the DPR Staff's diligence succeeded in increasing summer camp enrollment for those needing fee reductions. We appreciate the County's commitment to these children and to the teenagers that will benefit from the new programs proposed for funding.

**Nature Centers.** As requested in FY2024, and 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.* The nature center hours were cut during the pandemic, but it is time to restore them with a full complement of staff and programming. Visits to the nature centers are reduced fifty percent due to the operations reduction to three days from the former six days per week. Environmental education, a key component of the FNRP, could more easily be accomplished with restored nature center hours of operation. Increasing the availability of Arlington's nature centers supports the goals of the Biophilic City Network, joined by Arlington in 2020, to provide equitable access to nature, conserve natural resources, and provide educational opportunities to learn about nature. Arlington's outstanding volunteer corps provided more than 3,000 nature center hours per year before the cuts, but only half as many hours per year since.

**Mitigation of Invasive Plants.** The PRC is pleased that the County manager has prioritized invasive plant management with \$300,000 of increased one-time funding, but we encourage the County to consider increasing ongoing funding so that more acres can be transferred to the "active maintenance" category sooner, reducing the need for aggressive treatments in the future. While the proposed one-time funding increase is an improvement, *ongoing funding would allow the most optimal, cost-effective invasive removal strategy.* Last year's one-time increased funding of \$100,000 was intended to:

"provide the one-time treatment of an additional 49 acres. . . . In FY 2025, one-time funding of \$300,000 will provide one time treatment of an additional 37 acres, and continued treatment of the 49 acres added in FY 2024."

### Commission Members

Jill Barker  
Shruti Kuppa  
Nelson Dimpter  
Dean Foster  
Colt Gregory  
Gretchen Hickey  
Neal Hunter  
Mark Lincoln  
Claire Pascocello  
Adam Rasmussen  
Melissa Riggio  
Alex Sanders  
Gary Shinnars  
Andreana Lin

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Page 741 of FY25 budget proposal. Planning and targeting the invasive treatments over the course of several years would help optimize the use of these funds. To the extent that this program preserves trees, justification for its increase is set forth in the paragraph below, as well.

**Tree Maintenance Increases.** PRC is very pleased with the proposal to increase spending by almost one million dollars for tree maintenance. This will allow Arlington's tree canopy to be on a five-year pruning schedule which is optimal. This investment is well worth the expenditure to ensure our tree canopy continues to provide the environmental services we depend on.

Based on national research, the economic value of the trees located in the County can be quantified in the following ways: \$3.59 million/year of pollution removal; \$1.28 million/year of carbon sequestration; and \$717 thousand/year of avoided stormwater runoff. The overall structural value of Arlington's trees (e.g., the cost of having to replace a tree with a similar tree) is \$1.38 billion.

Page 739 of FY25 budget proposal. 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 from this green resource justifies even greater expenditure to ensure the ongoing health and abundance of Arlington's tree canopy.

It is important to ensure that our trees are thriving rather than suffering from erosion damage caused by excessive stormwater runoff into our parks' streams. Consideration should be given to increased collaboration among DPR and DES on stormwater management to protect our parks' trees from stormwater runoff, as well as to ensure that parks play a role in DES' plans to reduce harm from stormwater runoff. A climate action plan could help transparently resolve competition between built v. green infrastructure in a manner that accords with priorities set by the County Board.

The importance of the health of Arlington's trees extends to those on private lands. The PRC wrote to the County Board in March 2022 requesting significant changes to the Standard Site Plan Conditions, especially increasing the fee for a "replacement tree" from the 2007 level of \$2,000, to a higher amount commensurate with our current understanding of the true value of our tree canopy. Inflation alone would justify a fee more in the range of \$3,500.

**Programming.** PRC is very pleased with the successful efforts of DPR Staff to ensure that our most vulnerable children have every opportunity to benefit first from Arlington's summer camp programs. We are pleased with the report that the staff's extra efforts in this regard yielded much higher enrollments from this population than in past years. Moreover, we are fully supportive of the new teen programming proposed in the budget and applaud the County Manager and DPR leadership for emphasizing the importance of investing in our teenagers' after school programs.

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, but vulnerable. We support continued and enhanced investment in the viability and quality of these important natural assets and look forward to discussing the acquisition of additional public lands as part of the FY25 Capital Improvement Plan.

Sincerely,

Jill Barker

*/s/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