

Proposed Redesign of Nelly Custis Park Nelly Custis Neighborhood Conservation Project

Participants

The Nelly Custis Design Working Group (DWG) consists of residents of the Aurora Highlands community and County staff. A thoughtful process was undertaken to ensure the community participants were representative of various stakeholder groups.

Community: Stacy Meyer, Alexander Fernández, Julie Bartsch Riley, Stephanie Lyons, Geva Lester, William Pott, Mary Humphreys, Paul Guttridge, David Litman (NC Rep)

County: Kathy von Bredow (Project Manager), Wilfredo Calderon (Community Relations), Kasey Spriggs (Park Area Manager), Vincent Verweij (Urban Forest Manager).

Process

The DWG met 3 times between June and October and also did significant research both before and after each meeting.

Prior to the first meeting, County staff identified different types of play equipment throughout the region. Members of the DWG (and their kids) visited many parks throughout Arlington, Alexandria and the District to look at and playtest the equipment.

June 7 – The DWG met at Nelly Custis Park. The first meeting was devoted to sharing ideas about overall concepts for the park, how it is currently used, what their vision is for the park, their thoughts on different types of play equipment based on their play experience, and what kind of uses they want to support. The County also presented design constraints identified as a result of its engineering survey including location of existing underground lines, tree root zones, and storm water management needs. A couple of members prepared presentations on possible plantings and play equipment. The DWG also discussed must haves versus nice-to-haves based on budget considerations.

August 2 – Based on the discussions at the first meeting, the County presented design alternatives to the DWG. For the play area, the group expressed a strong preference for one of the play area alternatives and generally supported or identified choices for the rest of the park. The DWG had several questions and items they wanted the County to look at. The group determined that they wanted these items addressed before sharing the design with the community.

October 5 – The County staff presented the design posted here which addresses the concerns of the DWG. The DWG made recommendations on certain furnishings and fixtures. The County was also asked to provide more data about the efficacy of the proposed storm water measures in the design but the group felt comfortable

recommending the design go forward to the community for review and approval. Additional data on storm water management will be provided as soon as available.

The Design

The overall design divides the park loosely into 3 zones: 1) the play area on the eastern side of the park, 2) a central open grassy area, and 3) a contemplative gathering area on the west side of the park.

Play Area

The play area is being completely replaced. The current playground is inefficiently laid out and does not conform with the latest safety requirements. By redesigning the playground, more diverse and expanded equipment can be included and the useable play area is increased by almost 40%.

As with the existing play area, the proposed play area has been designed for children aged 5 to 12. Per the community's wishes, equipment that would accommodate different age ranges within that demographic was selected. Although some of the proposed equipment is likely to be preschooler friendly (as in the existing play area), Nina Park, a County Park designed specifically for preschoolers, is one block down the street. The play area will have playground safety surfacing of different colors to indicate different levels of challenge within the park. Standard age-appropriate park signage will be included

How was the play equipment selected? As noted earlier, members of the DWG visited parks with their children and tested many varieties of equipment. The equipment selected was based on the combined experience of the County project manager and the DWG volunteers.

The play area will be ADA accessible and include benches, picnic tables and seat walls, and some natural boulders.

Central Grassy Area

The grass in the center of the park will be completely rehabilitated. The maintenance gate will be replaced by a smaller gate and the asphalt will be removed and replaced with grass pavers.

There will be a swale for storm water management along the edge of the play area with boulders for "fun" access. The swale also provides a buffer between the 2 areas. A second, smaller swale will be located along the north property border with Linden Resources where the fence makes a 90 degree turn.

There will be benches along the walk, moveable picnic tables, and additional plantings along the fence bordering the property line of Linden Resources and 24th Street South.

Contemplative Area

The western side of the park will include benches, moveable picnic tables, and plantings to allow for small gatherings away from the hustle/bustle of the play area.

The size of this part of the park will be increased by reclaiming an easement from the Linden parking lot in the [northwest corner of the park. The wooden fence going north/south will be relocated and replaced with a similar style wooden privacy fence.

The concrete path loop will be retained.

Features

Gates

There will be 2 custom-designed gates at each end of the park with a tree motif. The maintenance gate will be replaced with a 10' maintenance gate raised 12 to 18 inches off the ground.

Concrete Path

The concrete path will be made ADA compliant at the entrances and around the playground. The concrete will be replaced by porous concrete in the upper park/play area.

The rest of the concrete path will remain, although its route may be slightly adjusted at the central/western end to provide area for the swale and additional plantings to mitigate parking lot runoff from the Linden Resources property.

The concrete path in the contemplative area will remain a continuous loop path. for all the bikers and "trikers" out there.

Plantings

New plantings will be native in order to create biodiversity within the park property. Many new trees, shrubs and perennials will be added, both in the swales, in the reclaimed portion of the property easement within the "contemplative" area, and along the park perimeter including a portion of the street frontage along 24th Street South. Planting design is dependent upon final engineering of the park.

The overall number of trees on the property will increase, over 20 additional trees – evergreen, ornamental and overstory - will be planted on site. The Bradford Pears bordering the Linden Resources property line will be removed and replaced with other trees as they are invasive and in poor condition.

Site Furnishings

Benches will be standard park benches that are currently found on many project sites within the County.

There will be fixed, moveable, and ADA compliant picnic tables.

A water fountain with a new waterline connection, water meter and a hose bib on the west side of the park is included as a nice-to-have feature, budget permitting.

New park signage is included, featuring new park signs at each entrance, a park rules sign at each entrance, and a standard age-appropriate sign at the playground area.

We're working on incorporating a hammock and a musical instrument if space can be found and budget permits.

Storm Water Management

Storm water management is a critical part of this project - in fact, a significant portion of the construction budget is devoted to features mitigating storm water runoff. Currently the entire park property and the impervious parking lot at Linden Resources drain to 24th Street South and water flows to the intersection at 24th Street South and South Hayes Street. High usage in the lawn area has led to compacted soil and increased the drainage problem. There is no storm drain on 24th street to which pipes or structures may be tied.

The proposed design incorporates many features to improve storm water management. The DWG wanted more information on the efficacy of the proposed measures, and a report addressing that is being prepared by the County's on call engineer and will be provided to DWG members before the November Civic Association meeting. The engineer will also be at the meeting to answer any questions from the community.

Dog Management

The DWG wants Nelly Custis Park to be a welcoming place for dog owners with properly leashed dogs. However, the issue of people using the park to let their dogs run free is of serious concern. Because of its small size and heavy usage by children, the DWG felt it had to address the issue proactively. New park rules signage is included at both entrances of the park and clearly indicates that dogs are not allowed within the play areas and must be on a leash at all times. The swale, additional plantings, seat wall and boulders also help to create a separation between the play area and general park area.

The DWG also selected custom gates for the entrances and a maintenance gate. The gate at the west end of the park and the maintenance gate clearly define the park

boundary and at the same time help create a more “open” feel to the west side of the park which is intended to discourage dogs off-leash.