

Foreword to the Great Parks, Great Communities Plan

WELCOME

The Park Authority is pleased to present the Great Parks, Great Communities Plan. The following chapters offer a long-range plan for the place-based, physical aspects of the park system, its land, its natural and cultural resources, and its facilities. This Plan reflects input from a wide-ranging community of park users and supporters who contributed to its completion and continually hold us to the highest standards. Meeting high public expectations requires a commitment to sustainability that includes land, facilities, natural, cultural and financial resources. To that end, this Plan is used in concert with other guiding Agency policies and plans that guide decision making and operations.

SUSTAINING OUR MISSION

The Great Parks, Great Communities Plan fits within the context of our core mission, our vision, and our values.

Mission Statement

To set aside public spaces for and assist citizens in the protection and enhancement of environmental values, diversity of natural habitat and cultural heritage to guarantee that these resources will be available to both present and future generations. To create and sustain quality facilities and services which offer citizens opportunities for recreation, improvement of their physical and mental well-being, and enhancement of their quality of life.

THE FINANCIAL PICTURE

Since the 1990s, a greater reliance on the Revenue Fund has been necessary as the percentage of the overall County General Fund budget allocated to parks has decreased from 1.2% to 0.7%. Since FY2000, Park Revenue Fund Expenditures grew 74% compared to 24% growth in General Fund Expenditures. The absorption of operational costs by the Revenue Fund has added pressures to revenue facilities such as RECenters and golf courses, especially as these facilities age and competition from private-sector providers increases. Shifts in pricing, cost centers and fee generation have been necessary to sustain the Revenue Fund as it absorbs more General Fund costs. In the extreme budget cut years from FY 2008-10, the Revenue Fund viability has been extremely fragile. Continued revenue growth depends on facility development and reinvestment, which requires capital funding.

We anticipate the trend of reliance on revenue supported operations to continue and the resulting reliance on revenue-generating activities to increase over time. The Park Authority has adopted a renewed focus on financial sustainability, understanding that constrained funding and the continued growth in need for service, programs and resource stewardship, it is essential to grow revenue-generating activities. A sound and sustainable Business Plan will be adopted later this year (2011) and will focus the agency on its core businesses.

The purpose of the Business Plan is to create a 'road map' to enable the Park Authority to stabilize its operations and position itself to better serve and meet the needs of the citizens of Fairfax County through a business model that enables the Authority to be more financially sustainable. Key steps in the development of the Business Plan were the identification, review and analysis of all core services and programs, determining full costs for each of the core program areas and constructing a sustainability model that accounts for all costs (direct, indirect and overhead) as well as annualized capitalized expenses for ongoing system repair and replacement. This funding model will be applied to all programs and services for the ongoing close management of the organizations operations. The Business Plan contains a clear strategy for ongoing investment in new and renewed revenue generating facilities and programs through the CIP with regularly scheduled bond referenda. Finally, a cost-recovery target has been developed for each of the core programs and service areas.

In addition to the focus on sustainable operations, capital investments in our facilities and stewardship efforts are also key to future growth and sustainability. The Needs Assessment completed in 2004 included a \$376M 10-year Capital Plan that addresses land, new facilities and renovation needs throughout the park system. As we near the end of this 10-year Plan, we have made progress in meeting these needs through investments totaling over \$155M. More than half of these identified needs have gone unaddressed and growing public demand for services exacerbates this situation.

This Great Parks Plan considers the need for financial sustainability and has woven that need into Funding and Sustainability sections within the Countywide chapter and within Planning District chapters where appropriate. This Plan also takes a view beyond the funding horizon – a view necessary for a long-range planning document based on themes and the combined visions of the public and staff. Implementation of this view, described in more detail toward the end of the Countywide chapter, will take place through several actions; all of these actions will be grounded in the agency's focus on financial sustainability.

Several on-going initiatives focusing on core services, strategic planning, marketing and business planning will assist the agency in accomplishing its mission, achieving its vision, and retaining system sustainability. Alignment of these initiatives with the Great Parks Plan is an important component of agency wide sustainability.

MANAGING OUR ASSETS

The Park Authority acts as a steward for considerable natural and built assets. Streams, forests, specialized habitats, outdoor recreational facilities, and indoor community spaces all require protection, maintenance, restoration, repair, and reinvestment.

Providing continued management of our natural and built environment is a core tenet of sustainability and is one that will be a focus of the agency's continued work. New approaches to funding natural resource improvements, such as stream restoration and tree canopy management, will be identified and used. Recognition that investing in these projects can and should have access to established capital funding streams, an approach also known as Natural Capital Investment, will help us achieve our goals.

Implementing alternative funding methods and seeking out expanded partnerships, with private entities, non-profits, and other groups, will also increase our ability to maintain and sustain our park system.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

When we put together our plans, our policies, and our financial sustainability initiatives, we move closer towards our mission, our vision, and a sustainable park system. This Great Parks, Great Communities Plan is one of several plans that will help guide Park Authority actions over the next several decades. A Policy Manual, a Strategic Plan, a Business Plan, Natural and Cultural Resource Management Plans, a Needs Assessment Report, and other guiding documents are described in the Countywide chapter.

Park users and supporters can expect that all of these plans and efforts will contribute to a more sustainable park system. Changing needs, changing demands and shifting funding will require that services and programs be continually re-examined. The ways in which services have been provided may be reconsidered, and may be altered to be more self-sustaining through user fees or partnered sponsorships. But, through it all, the Park Authority will remain committed to providing high quality facilities and services and to being responsible stewards of this County's valued natural and cultural resources.

This Great Parks, Great Communities Plan is the product of significant public and staff effort – thank you to all those who contributed to the process and also to all of those who continue to support our public parks in various invaluable ways.