



MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PARKS
THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

MCPB
Item: 5
Date: 10/6/11

September 22, 2011

MEMORANDUM

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Mary R. Bradford, Director of Parks *Mary R. Bradford*
Michael F. Riley, Deputy Director *Michael F. Riley*
Mitra Pedoeem, Chief, Park Development Division *Mitra*

FROM: Patricia McManus, Design Section Supervisor, Park Development, 301-495-3580 *pm*
Ching-Fang Chen, Landscape Architect/Project Manager, 301-495-2557 *CFC*

SUBJECT: Facility Plan for the Day Use Area at Little Bennett Regional Park

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

- 1) Approve Recommended Facility Plan, including cost estimate.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Introduction

Little Bennett Regional Park is located near Clarksburg, east of MD 355 (Frederick Road) and just south of the Frederick County line. With over 3,600 acres, Little Bennett Regional Park is the largest park in the M-NCPPC park system. The park includes many historic sites, and it is considered to be one of the best contiguous natural areas in Montgomery County. Existing park facilities include a 91-site campground, an 18-hole golf course and driving range, over 23 miles of natural surface trails, and a maintenance yard with offices for park personnel. Approximately 67,500 visitors come to the park each year to enjoy hiking, cycling, birding, camping, fishing, horseback riding, plant walks, interpretive programs and golf.

While the park is popular, there is no recognized entrance. The 2007 Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan envisioned a gateway and day use area that would serve as the main park entrance and a destination for visitors. The day use area would include a visitor and nature interpretation center with supporting nature-based recreational opportunities. The master plan identified the day use area as a high priority project for implementation, and the purpose of this project is to prepare a facility plan for this area of the park. Given the current economic conditions and a reduced operating budget for the Department of Parks, this project does not include the visitor and nature interpretation center as part of the facility plan. The facility plan includes a small outdoor classroom building to support nature-based educational programs, and

the formal visitor and nature center would be considered as a future phase project. Refer to Attachment A for the Facility Plan Report and Attachment B for Appendices.

Project Funding

The facility planning study was funded with \$349,289 from the FY 2010-2011 Capital Improvements Program in the Facility Planning: Non-Local Parks PDF. Facility planning represents thirty percent complete construction documents, including a proposed design, cost estimate and determination of regulatory feasibility. This project was designed in-house by a staff landscape architect in a collaborative effort with support from engineering and specialty consultants. The prime consultants hired in April 2010 were A. Morton Thomas and Associates, Inc. for civil engineering, survey, natural resources inventory, forest conservation, geotechnical work, stormwater management and cost estimating services and Cutler Anderson Architects for building design. If approved the project would be proposed for design and construction in the Fiscal Year 2013-2018 Capital Improvements Program (CIP.) The schedule of the project would be determined during review of the CIP.

Facility Planning Process

The facility planning process includes the following sequence of work:

1. Collect data, prepare site survey, and perform geotechnical investigations.
2. Analyze existing site conditions.
3. Prepare and obtain approval of Natural Resources Inventory/Forest Stand Delineation Summary Map.
4. Prepare preliminary design based on park master plan guidance.
5. Present design to the community and stakeholders.
6. Prepare stormwater management concept submission and obtain approval from the Department of Permitting Services.
7. Refine design based on input received.
8. Prepare preliminary forest conservation plan submission.
9. Coordinate any outstanding issues with stakeholder groups and regulatory agencies.
10. Prepare facility plan report, cost estimate, and operating budget estimate.
11. Present facility plan recommendations and costs to the Montgomery County Planning Board for approval.

MASTER PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

Master plan recommendations that are pertinent to the development of the day use area are outlined in this section of the staff report. Detailed references regarding greenways, trails and bikeways are included, because some of the recommendations from various master plans were inconsistent. These recommendations were reviewed and coordinated with staff from the Department of Planning, Department of Parks and the Montgomery County Department of Transportation, in order to interpret them and develop trail recommendations for the day use area.

Clarksburg Master Plan and Hyattstown Special Study Area, Approved and Adopted June 1994

While Little Bennett Regional Park is just outside the boundaries of the Clarksburg Master Plan and Hyattstown Special Study Area (and included in the boundaries of the October 1980 Approved and Adopted Functional Master Plan for Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space,) policies and recommendations from the Clarksburg Master Plan inform the development of the Little Bennett Regional Park day use area. The Clarksburg Master Plan establishes a strong commitment to the vision of Clarksburg as a transit and pedestrian oriented community surrounded by rural open space, emphasizes protection of environmental and historic resources, and recommends that Clarksburg's natural features be protected.

The Clarksburg and Hyattstown areas are conveniently located near two of the county's largest regional parks, Black Hill and Little Bennett. A key goal of the Clarksburg Master Plan is to connect park facilities and natural areas to the greenway network. The plan's Greenway Network Policy recommends a multi-purpose greenway system along stream valleys. The greenway network is described on pages 20 and 21 of the master plan as a major organizing element of the open space network, including parks, schools, stream buffer areas and a hiker-biker trail system. The plan defines a greenway as follows:

A "greenway" is simply a linear corridor - it may be as elaborate as a paved hiker-biker trail or as simple as a woodland path. Facilities in greenways should be compatible with environmental goals.

The proposed greenway network is shown in Figure 48 on page 157 of the plan and follows the main stream stems of three stream valleys: Little Seneca Creek, Little Bennett Creek, and Ten Mile Creek. The proposed Ten Mile Creek Greenway will connect the southern end of Little Bennett Regional Park to Black Hill Regional Park. The proposed Little Seneca Creek Greenway will connect the southern end of Little Bennett Regional Park to the Clarksburg Town Center and Ovid Hazen Wells Recreational Park. The proposed Little Bennett Creek Greenway will connect the northern end of Little Bennett Regional Park to conservation areas in Frederick County. The plan describes the overall intent of the greenway network on page 156 as follows:

The intent of the Plan is to acquire, at a minimum, enough of these stream valleys to allow development of a trail system. These trails may be paved or soft surfaces that may be enjoyed by hikers, bikers, or equestrians. It is intended that these trails be constructed outside of the 100-year floodplain, wherever possible, with a minimum amount of clearing and grading and with a sufficient buffer from adjacent development.

The Clarksburg Master Plan includes a bikeway plan on pages 131-135 that supports its objectives regarding greenways and transit. The bikeway plan objectives include: provide a logical relation to the Countywide Bikeway Plan and Master Plan of Boyds, Germantown and Damascus areas; integrate the bikeway system with greenways; emphasize bikeway access from neighborhoods to shopping and employment areas as well as to key community facilities; and emphasize bike paths that are separated from streets and roads.

There are five master planned bikeway recommendations in the vicinity of Little Bennett Regional Park shown on Figure 43 and described in Table 10 on pages 132 and 133 of the plan. Bikeway recommendations which are different from the Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan are described below:

- Route B-1, North-South Greenway: This is a Class I bikeway (shared use off-road path) that extends from Newcut Road through Little Bennett Regional Park with a connection to Sugarloaf and the Frederick County Line. The trail south of Little Bennett from Newcut Road to Clarksburg Road and Snowden Farm Parkway (at Kings Local Park) will be built by developers on land that will be dedicated to the Department of Parks.
- Route B-3, Frederick Road: This is a Class I bikeway (shared use off-road path) that follows the alignment of MD 355 through the county to the Frederick County line and includes the Hyattstown Bypass. The majority of the existing bikeway north of Gaithersburg is on the west side of MD 355. The bikeway currently ends at MD 121, Clarksburg Road.
- Route B-4, Old Frederick Road In Hyattstown: This is a Class III bikeway (signed shared roadway) along the segment of MD 355 bypassed by the Hyattstown Bypass.
- Route B-6, East-West Greenway through Little Bennett Regional Park: This is a Class I bikeway (shared use off-road path) from Shiloh Church Road, along Comus Road and crossing the southern section of Little Bennett Regional Park with the intent to connect to Damascus. The proposed alignment bisects the campground and appears to be a conceptual idea rather than a proposed alignment.

Due to the low density land use patterns, the Clarksburg Master Plan does not recommend future sewer or water service for properties adjacent to Little Bennett Regional Park east of I-270 and north of Comus Road, except for Hyattstown. Figure 51 on page 202 of the plan identifies future service areas for sewer and water. Roadway recommendations are outlined in Table 7 on page 115 of the master plan. MD 355 (Frederick Road) from Comus Road to the Hyattstown Bypass is recommended to remain as a two lane road. On page 121, the plan also recommends that Frederick Road not be widened in the Clarksburg Historic District and the Hyattstown Historic District.

Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan, Approved and Adopted March 2005

The Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan was developed with the goal of providing connectivity to major park destinations and the major park trail corridors. The Countywide Park Trails Plan by contrast focuses solely on trails within the park system. Both plans together create an integrated bikeway and park trail system.

The Countywide Bikeways Functional Master Plan states the following on page 27:

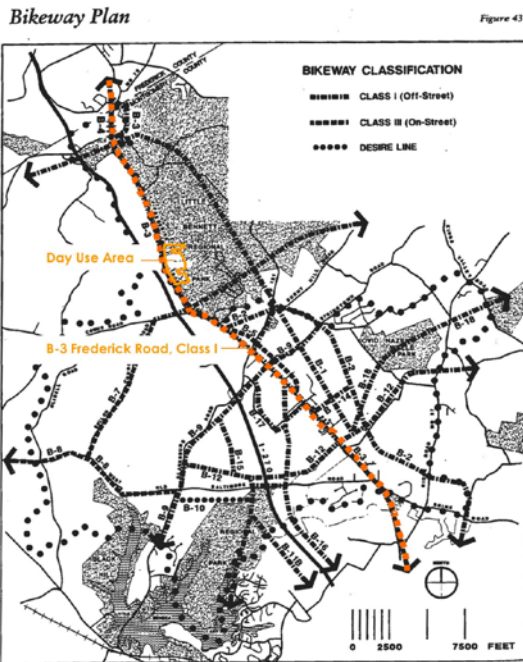
Bikeways along roads can be important components of a trail network especially when they offer an opportunity to avoid sensitive environmental features in parks. In Clarksburg, shared use paths along future roadways will be part of the Clarksburg Greenway Trail system so that sensitive environmental features in certain stream valleys can be avoided.

Figure 2-15 on page 42 of the plan shows four existing, planned and proposed countywide bikeways in the Clarksburg area near Little Bennett Regional Park and illustrates a connection to the greenway trail system. The routes are described on pages 60 and 61:

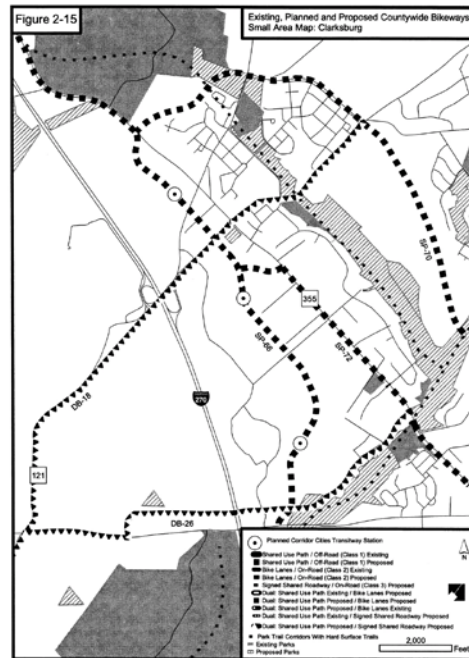
- Route SP-70, Midcounty Highway: This is a shared use, off-road bikeway (Class I), along the north side of Midcounty Highway and Snowden Farm Parkway extending from the ICC to MD 355, terminating just south of Little Bennett Regional Park. This route is the same as

Route B-2 described in the Clarksburg Master Plan.

- Route SP-72, Frederick Road (MD 355)-Upcounty: This is a shared use, off-road bikeway (Class I) from Watkins Mill Road to the Frederick County line. The alignment mainly follows MD 355, except where it deviates to connect to planned Corridor Cities Transitway stations. This route is similar to Route B-3 described in the Clarksburg Master Plan.
- Route SP-66, Corridor Cities Transitway bike path: This is a shared use, off-road bikeway extending from Shady Grove Metro Station to MD 355. It is described as already existing in some segments as part of other bikeways and will connect most of the major employment centers in the I-270 corridor north of Rockville.
- Route DB-18, Clarksburg Road (MD 121)/Stringtown Road: This is a proposed dual bikeway (both shared use path and shared roadway) along Clarksburg Road (MD 121) from Stringtown Road south to Clopper Road (MD 117) and will provide connections to Black Hill Regional Park.



Clarksburg Master Plan and Hyattstown Special Study Area
APPROVED AND ADOPTED: JUNE 1994
1994 Clarksburg Master Plan



2005 Countywide Bikeways Plan

Countywide Park Trails Plan, Amended September 2008

The Countywide Park Trails Plan provides recommendations for the Clarksburg area in Corridor 8 for the Upcounty area. Figure 15 on page 42 shows the overall greenway trail concept shown in the 1994 Clarksburg Master Plan.

Vision 2030: The Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan

Vision 2030 is a strategic plan for park and recreation services in Montgomery County for the next twenty years. The current draft plan, dated June 2011, shows Little Bennett Regional Park

located in the Potomac/Rural planning area on the border line with the North Central planning area (which includes Clarksburg). Volume 2 of the current draft (page 67) indicates that the Potomac/Rural and the North Central areas have the lowest concentration and access to all recreational components. Page 10 indicates that the largest percentage of population growth in the next twenty years is projected to be concentrated in the North Central area.

A summary of survey results is outlined on page 16 of Volume 2. The results identify program areas rated as high priorities to improve or expand, including health and wellness, outdoor nature programs and children and youth activities. On page 22 surveys identified additional facilities that rated high in importance, including trails, playgrounds and natural areas. In the table on page 76 (Appendix E), survey results from the Potomac/Rural planning area show a demand for a nature center and natural surface trails.

2005 Land Preservation, Parks, and Recreation Plan (LPPRP)

The 2005 Land Preservation, Parks, and Recreation Plan (LPPRP) includes a park classification system and provides quantitative estimates of future recreational facility needs to the year 2020. Facilities that are needed countywide in regional and recreational parks are identified on pages III-28 through III-30. There is an estimated need for the following facilities by 2020: 2 additional nature centers, 105 miles of natural surface regional trails, 22 miles of hard surface regional trails, and 5,495 acres of natural areas. In Appendix XIV, on page A XIV-1, results from the 2003 Montgomery County Park User Satisfaction Survey ranked the five most popular park facilities or areas in order as follows:

1. Natural Areas
2. Playgrounds
3. Picnic Areas
4. Hard Surface Trails
5. Natural Surface Trails

Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan, March 2007

The Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan proposes recommendations for the following: nature based retreat, trails, the day use area, interpretive emphasis, and park character along MD Route 355.

Nature Based Retreat

The master plan concept of a nature based retreat is described on page 5 of the plan. The plan emphasizes the importance of allowing visitors to experience a sense of solitude in nature and to retain the park as a place of sanctuary and natural beauty. The plan recommends protecting and preserving key environmental features of the park, including Sopers Branch stream, the county's best collection of American sycamore trees, an uncommon swamp complex of high quality skunk cabbage along Sopers Branch, and meadow habitats. On page 5, the plan recommends protecting meadow areas and states the following:

Within Little Bennett, wet and dry meadows, old fields from 5 to 20 years old, and agricultural fields support a tremendous amount of wildlife, bird and insect life. Open meadows are increasingly rare in the Piedmont region.

Trails

The plan recommends providing a comprehensive, sustainable trail network for the entire park and linking that network to regional greenways. The proposed trail map on page 10 shows a natural surface trail extension of the Clarksburg Greenway trail extending from Snowden Farm Parkway and Clarksburg Road through the park to connect to the Western Piedmont Trail. This would provide the trail connection described as Route B-1 in the 1994 Clarksburg Master Plan. The plan also recommends extending a hard surface trail connection along Route 355 on the east side of the road from Snowden Farm Parkway to Hyattstown and indicates a preference on page 19 that the trail be set back within the park 50 feet from the right-of-way. The plan describes this trail on page 14 as follows:

A hard surface trail is proposed along the park frontage of MD 355. This trail will meet Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines and will provide access to the gateway area of the park as well as historic features closer to Hyattstown.

Gateway Features

The plan recommends developing a gateway into the park that welcomes visitors and focuses on natural learning and natural themes. The plan states the following on page 14:

Although Little Bennett Regional Park is over 3600 acres, it is in many ways a "hidden treasure." Park owned houses from the original park acquisition obscure views into the park. The absence of any type of public entrance along MD 355 limits public access and public awareness of the park's presence. This Gateway Area Concept Plan welcomes people to a Day Use Area and provides them an overview of the natural and cultural interpretive opportunities awaiting them.

Activities proposed for the gateway area are nature based and largely unstructured and include picnic areas, meadow habitats, native plant education areas, a group campfire, an amphitheatre, an adventure playground and trails. A Visitors Center with an interpretive focus is proposed.

The master plan provided a concept plan on page 15 of the plan to guide development of the area. The following recommendations are outlined on page 16:

- *Provide a welcoming entrance into the park that respects the natural terrain and preserves vistas of the natural landscape.*

As shown in the Day Use Area Concept Plan, a key component of the entrance should be a "focal point" that reinforces the natural character of the park. This focal point could be some type of water feature (a pond or wetlands) or naturalized meadow. The objective is to assure that the entry into the park underscores the special experience awaiting the visitor in terms of enjoying and understanding nature.

- *Provide an enhanced landscaped buffer along MD 355 to heighten the sense of enclosure in the gateway area.*
- *Provide meadows and garden areas as a "preview" of the types of plants, trees, birds and butterflies that may be found in the park interior.*

- Provide recreational opportunities that focus on casual enjoyment of the out of doors and are linked to the park's landscape.

Park Character Along Road Frontage

The plan makes the following recommendations on page 18:

- Create a design concept for MD 355 and Clarksburg Road that clearly defines the area as parkland and points to the natural beauty that awaits those who visit the park.
- Remove non-historic park houses as the opportunity presents (sic) arises.

Interpretive Emphasis

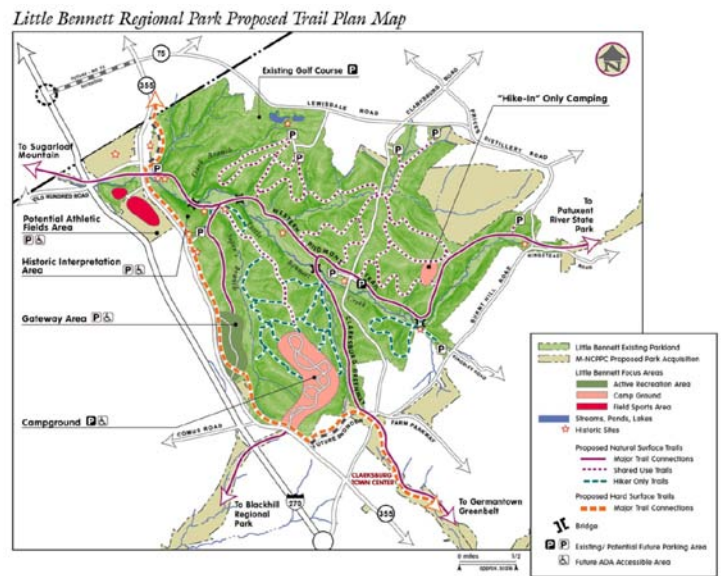
The plan recommends telling the story of life in Montgomery County's Piedmont and its influence on the culture and ecology of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The plan includes the following recommendation on page 24:

- Include an interpretive center at Little Bennett Regional Park to foster public understanding of the park's natural historic and cultural features.

While interpretive programming is a given as a recommendation of this Plan, an interpretive center could greatly expand public enjoyment of the Park. An interpretive center could be a part of the proposed Visitor's center or could be a freestanding building. This decision needs to be guided by a comprehensive study of park interpretive centers. The Park Recreation and Open Space (PROS) Plan anticipates a countywide need for two interpretive centers in the next 20 years. A countywide study should help guide where these centers should be located and include recommendations as to building size, parking requirements and associated scope of services that would be delivered from the facility. As noted in the implementation chapter, such a study should be initiated to allow the findings to guide future planning and design of the Visitors center at Little Bennett Regional Park.



Day Use Area Concept



Trails Concept

PROGRAM OF REQUIREMENTS

The program of requirements for the day use area was identified in the 2007 Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan and was slightly refined during the facility planning study. Program elements were adjusted to better fit with the ecological and cultural context of the park. For example, the focal point water feature suggested in the Gateway Concept was removed from the program due to feasibility and replaced with the meadow as the focal feature.

The only other significant deviation is the deferral of the visitor and nature center as part of this project. As recommended in the park master plan, the design of an interpretive center at Little Bennett Regional Park would require guidance from a future countywide study of interpretive centers, which has yet to be implemented. Nevertheless, the program for the day use area has significant interpretive emphasis, so the facility plan includes a small classroom facility as a component of the plan. The program includes the following:

Park Framework

- Two park entrances with access road
- 265 vehicle parking spaces, 3 horse trailer parking spaces
- Hard and natural surface trails
- Vehicle access for park maintenance
- Stormwater management facilities
- Entrance markers
- Signage and site furnishings
- Utilities – well, septic, electric, communication services

Nature Based Recreation

- Group picnic area, smaller picnic areas, terraces and shelter
- Amphitheater
- Group fire ring
- Play complex, hay play and sledding hill

Visitor Facility

- Multi-purpose outdoor classroom pavilion with interior reception area, multifunction classroom/meeting space, private work area, storage, utility spaces, restrooms, exterior terrace and outdoor educational space

Interpretation

- Meadow habitats
- Interpretive trails, bridges and boardwalks with stream and wetland overlooks and signage
- Stormwater management features - Sycamore rings
- Teaching alcoves, bird house point
- Public art

Conservation and Stewardship

- Meadow enhancement and management
- Control of invasive plants
- Managed succession for landscape buffer

FACILITY PLAN DESIGN STUDY

Existing Conditions

The site for the day use area is approximately 65 acres in size and is located on MD 355 west of the Sopers Branch stream approximately one-half mile north of Comus Road. Single family rural residential (zoned Rural) and industrial areas (zoned I-1) are located across MD 355 to the west of the site, and an existing farm is located immediately south of the site. A leased park house is located at the northern end of the site, and parkland borders the remainder of the site to the north and east.

The site is characterized by rolling topography and an existing meadow, which is a remnant left from years of agricultural use. The meadow is currently managed and cut for hay on an annual basis by a local farmer. Natural resources staff identified the existing meadow as one of very few contiguous meadow landscapes left in the M-NCPPC park system and identified it as a high quality example with very few invasive species. There are sections of both dry and wet meadow habitat on the site. Unusual bird species, such as meadowlarks and wild turkey have been observed on the site.

The site descends approximately 60 to 80 feet from the ridgeline along MD 355 to forested areas and Sopers Branch stream to the east of the site. This stream is part of the Little Bennett Creek watershed, which is designated by the Maryland Department of the Environment as natural trout waters (Use III-P,) demonstrating a capability for the growth and propagation of natural trout populations and their associated food organisms. There are several fingers of wooded areas that extend from the stream valley into the meadow along drainage areas, creating three defined areas of meadow. From the west side of the site, there are uninterrupted dramatic views in all directions of meadow, forest and sky. Accents of Sycamore tree colonies are visible in the forest along the stream valley. The stream valley also includes an unusual example of a high quality wooded wetland with seep areas colonized by skunk cabbage, offering opportunities for nature interpretation.

The western periphery of the site along MD 355 is characterized by a continuous hedgerow, approximately 20 to 50 feet wide. The hedgerow includes a number of invasive species, but still provides a buffer and visual screening from the road. The main source of noise on the site is traffic on MD 355 and I-270 with some noise and activity on nearby industrial parcels. An acoustic study was conducted as part of the facility plan. It identified a 100-foot wide strip on the western boundary of the site with a Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) of approximately 65 decibels (dB.) The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends a DNL of 55 dB for outdoor activities. This recommended sound level can be reached quickly approximately 200 feet from the road, because of a change in site elevation of 30-40 feet. The eastern half of the site is much quieter with a DNL of 50 dB or less. These areas of the site would be suitable for nature based recreation and interpretive activities.

Preliminary investigation indicates that the site would support well and septic facilities. Geotechnical tests indicate that the site soils would percolate for a septic field, and there are several existing wells nearby within the park and on adjacent property that provide adequate water supply.

Design Approach

The facility plan for the day use area proposes to highlight the unique character of the site and its surroundings. From west to east the character of the surrounding area shifts from rural homestead and road, to the meadow, and then to forest. This progression from managed human landscapes to nature provides a unique opportunity for story-telling and interpretation.

The facility plan respects this transition in locating the major programmatic elements of the plan. The main access road, parking and large group picnic areas are located on the western edge of the site to preserve the existing meadow. Trails and other programmatic elements are designed to be located within the meadow with direct access in a linear, non-intrusive manner which leaves large areas of the existing meadow intact. This approach is environmentally sensitive, efficient and cost effective. It reduces the developed areas of the site and minimizes stormwater management requirements. This layout deviates from the master plan concept of traditional site development, but includes all of the programmatic elements in a more sustainable and sensitive way that retains the aesthetic and cultural character of the site.

The programmatic features of the plan incorporate themes of the site and its surroundings, including the meadow, forest, streams, and rural agriculture. Landscape management practices for meadow and forested areas are intended to be part of the interpretive story. The plan also proposes use of innovative materials and design features to provide a memorable park experience.

Community Outreach

September 29, 2010

A public meeting was held with the community on September 29, 2010 to present master plan guidance, existing site conditions, and the proposed design approach for public input. Many of the community members were familiar with the site and participated in the planning process for the 2007 Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan. There was discussion about why the concept changed from the master plan concept and that the proposed approach would fulfill the program of requirements, protect the unique cultural and ecological landscape, increase the sustainability of the site, reduce costs, and reduce the developed footprint of the site. The attendees expressed general support for the design approach, the overall objectives and the design elements, and indicated that the concept takes a responsible approach to maintain and preserve natural areas and open space. A summary of key community comments is outlined below. A complete record of the meeting minutes is included in the appendices of the facility plan report.

- Consider the potential for widening of MD 355 and how it might affect the location of the park road and buffer landscape.
- Provide equestrian parking for the multi-use trail.
- Consider how the plan addresses the Clarksburg Greenway hard surface trail. The park master plan locates it immediately adjacent to MD 355 and not further within the day use area as proposed.
- Trails should be separated from the driveway and not combined with vehicular traffic.
- Provide other trail connections recommended in the park master plan (from Snowden Farm Parkway) and provide a connection from the Woodcrest community.
- Consider distances people need to walk to facilities.
- Provide some picnic areas with covered shelters.

- Consider the safety of the playground and ensure there is adequate visibility for parents to observe their children.
- Conduct a noise study to guide the location of facilities, including picnic areas.
- Consider alternative means of identifying the park entrances than the white markers. The design as shown is too modern and people may have difficulty relating to them.
- Consider providing interpretive information at trailhead areas along the driveway to provide information for those who prefer not to walk long distances. The history of MD 355 should be interpreted.
- Provide opportunities for winter activities, such as sledding or cross country skiing.
- There were questions about the purpose of the campfire feature, since the park is closed at dusk.
- There was support to develop the future visitor/nature interpretation center in this park.

May 23, 2011

Staff presented the project to the Clarksburg Civic Association at their annual meeting on May 23, 2011. There was general support for the project, however some community members were not satisfied with the resolution for the connection of the day use area to the Clarksburg Greenway Trail. Staff indicated that Montgomery County Department of Transportation staff had identified that the main bikeway on MD 355 would be located on the west side of MD 355 rather than the east side as shown on the park master plan. Several citizens requested additional investigation into this issue, and staff agreed to follow up. There were additional comments on some of the proposed play elements to ensure the safety of children, as well as questions about the campfire feature and use of the area at night.

June 15, 2011

Staff presented the project to the Upcounty Recreation Advisory Board on June 15, 2011. The Board supports the project and was pleased with the proposed design approach and design elements. They recommended that staff provide a comparison between the park master plan concept and the facility plan concept to demonstrate the benefits of the proposed facility plan for increasing sustainability and reducing development costs.

Additional Coordination and Regulatory Approvals

Montgomery County Department of Permitting Services

The stormwater management concept plan for the park was approved on September 13, 2011 (File #239813.)

M-NCPPC Department of Planning / Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)

A Natural Resources Inventory/Forest Stand Delineation (NRI/FSD) was approved for the park on August 23, 2010 (File #420110090.) An application for a variance was submitted to DEP on August 23, 2011 to remove two trees along MD 355 greater than 30" dbh, which are impacted by the park entrance configuration. The variance also requested approval for impacts to the critical root zones of four additional trees that are greater than 30" dbh. A preliminary forest conservation plan was submitted in August 2011 and a recommendation will be presented to the Montgomery County Planning Board by Department of Planning staff with the park facility plan.

Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA), Access Management Division

On December 7, 2010, SHA provided specific recommendations and comments for park entrance locations on MD 355 and requirements for their configuration.

Montgomery County Department of Permitting Services, Building Design Consultation

On June 1st, 2011, staff and consultants coordinated the proposed building design for the multi-purpose classroom pavilion and confirmed the applicable building codes, ADA and safety requirements. Well, septic and fire safety issues were coordinated on June 14th, 2011. Recommendations were provided for a well, septic system, required septic drain field area, and water storage tank for fire safety. Staff also coordinated the width of the access road to the building, turnaround requirements, and signage for emergency access.

Arts and Humanities Council of Montgomery County (AHCMC)

On May 10, 2011, staff presented the project to the Public Arts Trust Steering Committee of the AHCMC as a potential candidate for public art. Given the park's unique design theme and potential high level of use and public visibility as a regional facility, the Public Arts Trust supports the inclusion of public art in this project.

Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MC-DOT)

On August 16, 2011, Park Development staff met with the MC-DOT Bikeways Coordinator, M-NCPPC Area 3 Transportation Planning Staff, M-NCPPC Bikeways Coordinator, and M-NCPPC Department of Parks Trail Planning staff to discuss various planning document recommendations for Clarksburg trails and their potential interpretation. MC-DOT staff confirmed that the MD 355 bikeway (Route SP-72/B-3) will be located on the west side of MD 355 in the road right-of-way, not on the east side as per the Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan. The right-of-way on the west side of MD 355 is unconstrained by grade and trees and would best support the bikeway. MC-DOT typically provides lighting and also builds a public sidewalk on the opposite side of the road from the bikeway, so a five-foot sidewalk would be constructed on the east side of MD 355. MC-DOT does not anticipate including the bikeway and sidewalk project in their CIP in the near future.

Staff discussed the need to connect the day use area in the near term to the Clarksburg Town Center and the Clarksburg Greenway Trail. Staff agreed that approximately one mile of sidewalk on the east side of MD 355 from Stringtown Road to the day use area should be built to provide this connection and could be designed to be an eight-foot wide sidewalk and park trail connection. The 2007 park master plan recommended that the trail be set back from the road right-of-way a minimum of 50 feet to provide a better park experience. This may not be feasible due to environmental constraints, and it may not serve a dual purpose as a sidewalk if it is set back too far from the road. Park staff recommends initiating a separate trail facility plan or design project to study this important connection and will coordinate the design with MC-DOT. The trail on the east side of Meadow Drive within the day use area might serve as the MD 355 sidewalk for this segment of MD 355, since the right-of-way in this area is constrained by grade and trees. MC-DOT would make this determination at the time they design their project. Further coordination with DOT will occur during the detailed design phase of the day use area to ensure that trails and sidewalks that serve a dual purpose are designed to acceptable standards.

Recommended Facility Plan

The recommended facility plan attempts to protect large contiguous areas of meadow and biodiversity areas, as well as to provide the required recreational program and interpretive opportunities for visitors. Design elements incorporate a rural aesthetic character and encourage visitors to experience the beauty of the park through sight, touch, sound and smells, promoting education and encouraging reflection on the visitor's relationship to the landscape. The plan explores sustainability, innovation and contemporary approaches to park development and land stewardship. Individual elements of the plan are described below.

Park Entrances

Two park entrances along MD 355 are identified using distinctive features in an intuitive manner to promote way-finding. Along the road frontage, tall markers representing the white exfoliating bark of distant Sycamore trees are arranged in a progressive pattern increasing in frequency to visually identify park entrances. Sycamore tree plantings are also used for bio-retention areas near park entrances.

Meadow Drive

Meadow Drive is the main road along the western periphery of the site, providing opportunities for vehicular access and parking. The two-way road achieves slopes less than 5 percent throughout the entire 0.6 mile stretch. Parallel parking is provided on a continuous shoulder on the west side of the drive. Head-in parking areas with permeable surfaces are designed to provide convenient parking near main point of interests.

Trails and Sidewalks

The day use area is an important destination from the greenway trail network. The day use area will include a continuous eight-foot wide trail and sidewalk that runs parallel to Meadow Drive on the east side of the road. This main trail will provide connections to the public sidewalk on the east side of MD 355 and will connect to the future natural surface trail north of the day use area. Accessible walkways will be provided from this trail to bring visitors to the main points of interest within the day use area. Service roads will be provided for maintenance and emergency vehicles, and natural surface trails and mowed loop paths will provide walking trails to the interior meadow and forest edges.

Outdoor Classroom/Underlook

This facility is designed as a flexible indoor and outdoor space to accommodate groups of 20-30 people indoors with the opportunity for overflow to outdoor terraces and the adjacent amphitheater for larger groups. The Underlook takes advantage of distinctive natural features of the site. It is nestled underneath the main knoll of the meadow and overlooks a beautiful view of meadow and forest to the east. Developed areas to the west are out of sight and sound, in order to allow the visitor to capture and experience the spirit of the site and connect directly with nature. The building preserves the topography and vista of the main knoll overhead with a green roof and does not disrupt views of the meadow and forest looking east from Meadow Drive. This understated facility is a signature feature of the day use area.

The multi-purpose room is a flexible indoor or outdoor pavilion. In spring and fall the large windows can slide completely open for fresh air. The solar exposure provides ample daylight and winter heat gain, and geothermal heating and a green roof will mitigate temperature changes and energy consumption. The building is approximately 2,000 square feet, designed of concrete, steel and wood. It is intended for year round use, staffed or un-staffed, including a reception area for information and orientation, a multi-function room as classroom or meeting space, a private work area/office, storage, utility spaces and restrooms.

Entry walks are an integral part of the experience from the parking, entry terrace and group picnic area to the classroom facility. The straight walk that crosses the top of the knoll leads to the roof terrace of the building. Stairs on either side provide access to the lower level. Four trees are placed to offer shade and visual reference for the linear approach. A curved, accessible path is also provided to accommodate vehicular traffic for maintenance, fire safety and emergency. Infrastructure to support the building includes a well, septic system and drain field, and a water storage tank for fire safety.

Sycamore Rings

The Sycamore Ring is designed for stormwater management. Functional and aesthetic, the rings create a visual and hydraulic connection to the stream valley. The ring consists of a 40-foot diameter circular bio-retention planting area with Sycamore trees planted in an 80-foot diameter concentric circle. Seven Sycamore rings are strategically located along the drive to mitigate stormwater runoff. These unique features and their aesthetically designed outfall mechanisms provide opportunities for environmental education.

Park House Picnic Area

With beautiful long views into the meadow and underneath the shade of existing canopy trees, the open area near the existing park house offers an opportunity for family and group picnicking, as well as a trailhead for the future natural surface trail system. The surrounding flat area provides convenient parking for picnic and trail activities and will provide horse trailer parking for equestrians. The park house will be removed, and the foundation and walls may be reused as visitor reception facilities. A sidewalk and low stone walls will separate the vehicular parking from the picnic area, and a sound wall made of hay bales may be included to reduce noise from MD 355 and add interest to the picnic experience. Large and small groups can be accommodated in this spacious area with picnic tables scattered throughout.

Picnic Shelter and Overlook

Another picnic opportunity is provided with a shelter and overlook built into a slope north of the main knoll. While preserving the views and vistas of the site, the structure provides direct linkages to the trail and parking at the upper level, as well as accessible connections to the play area, Sycamore rings and the Underlook at the lower level. Visitors can pause at the roof overlook to enjoy a panoramic view into the landscape or descend to the lower level for picnicking in the shelter. The retaining wall and roof deck shield the noise from the road for picnic activity, and there are direct views into the shelter from Meadow Drive for security.

Playscape

The concept proposes locating the play area within the flattest and smallest finger of meadow between two stream buffers. The play elements are carefully located to offer an exciting play experience with minimal disruption to stream buffers and long views of continuous meadow. Surrounded by various types of ecosystems, the play elements are integrated with the natural environment and provide opportunities for education and enjoyment. Located in proximity to other program elements, it is a main hub for connection to the boardwalks, sledding hill, amphitheatre, outdoor classroom, and nature interpretation areas. An elevated tube walk provides an accessible route between the upper levels of the two play towers and offers prominent views of the surrounding landscape.

Fire Ring

Enclosed on one side by a berm, the east facing fire ring fits sinuously at the edge of the stream buffer within the play area. Day or night, with or without fire, the fire ring will be a focal point for exciting play and social gathering. The space is animated by the leaping and bouncing of participants on jumping pads surrounding the area.

Hay Play

Hay bales left from annual mowing can be incorporated along trails throughout the landscape for play. Kids can smell and touch, walk around the top, jump to other hay bales, or weave through a maze of bales.

Learning Alcoves

The diverse ecosystems of the day use area provide food, shelter and breeding grounds for abundant wildlife species. The stream valley in particular offers many opportunities for environmental education. A bluebird trail, Monarch butterfly station, and insect hotel can easily be incorporated throughout the site or along the access trail to the play area. Kids can observe vegetative succession and discover wildlife and insects in these living classrooms. Ever-changing natural processes enrich the learning experience during each visit.

Bird House Point

The open area at the tip of the stream valley provides a natural setting for bird watching. Habitat can be enhanced by placing bird houses for shelter, planting bird loving native plants for food, and harvesting and storing rain in a ponding area. Bird House Point is a focal feature to highlight the rich habitat of the day use area.

Sledding Hill

Sledding is a winter sport that children and many adults love. The large open meadow in the north finger has a gentle top, constant steep slope on the hillside, and a flat bottom. It is an ideal space for sledding. The annual mowing of the meadow occurs in fall and would accommodate winter recreational use of the meadow.

Boardwalk and Wetland Overlook

The boardwalk and Wetland Overlook are designed to provide access to and interpretation of unique environmental areas along Sopers Branch, while protecting the integrity of this unique ecosystem. The boardwalks and overlook platforms are designed to confine the visitors and provide necessary connections to future potential crossings of Sopers Branch. The five-foot wide accessible boardwalks are aligned to stay completely out of the critical root zones of trees larger than 30" diameter. The boardwalk will be constructed by hand with helical piles to minimize site disturbance. The transparent metal grating will ensure protection of existing hydrology and forest floor.

Public Art

The unique setting of the day use area provides opportunities for exhibiting art parallel with nature. The undulating profile of the meadow and the sky would complement artwork. The artwork would reflect changes in light, weather and season and appear to be constantly changing.

COSTS AND PHASING

Construction Costs

A summary of construction costs is outlined in the table below. A detailed cost estimate is included in the appendices of the facility plan report.

Item	Subtotal
General Conditions/Site Preparation	\$465,000
Earthwork	\$1,060,000
Stormwater Management, Sediment and Erosion Control	\$1,334,600
Outdoor Classroom/Underlook	\$680,000
Structures (picnic shelters, boardwalks, amphitheater, overlooks, walls, bridges, entrance features)	\$1,317,800
Paving (roads and trails)	\$1,804,200
Utilities	\$495,500
Play Area	\$1,441,000
Amenities (furnishings, signage, interpretive alcoves, public art)	\$622,000
Landscaping	\$692,800
Construction Subtotal	\$9,912,900
Construction Contingency (25% of Construction Subtotal)	\$2,478,200
Construction Total (Subtotal plus Contingency)	\$12,391,100
Design Contract with Contingency (9% of Construction Total)	\$1,115,200
Staff Chargebacks for Design (18% of Design Contract)	\$200,700
Construction Management & Inspections (2% of Construction Total)	\$247,800
TOTAL PROJECT COST	\$13,954,800

Phase One

A preliminary phase of work to design and construct an interim entrance area was funded in the FY12 Capital Improvements Program with \$200,000 from the Minor New Construction Non-Local PDF and \$200,000 from a State bond bill. This funding will be used to establish a gravel road and parking area from the northern park entrance to the northern parking area on the alignment shown in the facility plan. The funding will cover grading, stormwater management and gravel access improvements to this area. This work has been deducted from the facility plan project cost estimate.

Cost Efficiency

The approach to the project has been to reduce the developed areas of the site to minimize environmental impact and cost. The table below summarizes the development footprint proposed in the 2007 master plan concept compared to the facility plan. Based on a comparison of proportionate developed areas and costs, staff has estimated that the facility plan reduces the cost from the 2007 master plan by approximately half.

LBRP Master Plan Concept	Overall Improved Sustainability		Facility Plan Concept
	464	# Parking Spaces	265 <small>(does not include parking for future Visitor Center)</small>
	8,450'	Length of Road	3,590'
	282,000 sf	Paved Surface	160,000 sf
	50,000 sf	Needed Bioretention	28,000 sf
	23.5 acres	Road Disturbance	12 acres
	62-64 acres	Limit of Disturbance	32-34 acres
			

Operating Budget Impact

The operating budget impact was not completed at the time of this report and will be presented to the Montgomery County Planning Board at the meeting on October 6, 2011.

CONCLUSION

Staff recommends approval of the Facility Plan and associated cost estimate. The proposed day use area provides a much needed entrance and destination for visitors to Little Bennett Regional Park. The facility plan embraces the vision of the 2007 Little Bennett Regional Park Master Plan and highlights the unique ecological and cultural character of the site and its surroundings. The plan and its elements are designed efficiently, with a “less but better” approach, in order to serve multiple functions and provide flexibility for the future. The plan develops the site in a sustainable, sensitive and innovative way, to provide a memorable outdoor experience for future generations and to help bring the story of Montgomery County’s Piedmont region to life.

Attachments

- Attachment A: Facility Plan Report
- Attachment B: Appendices