

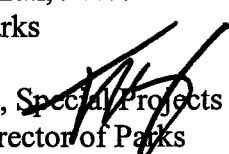


MCPB AGENDA ITEM # 15

September 6, 2001

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: Donald K. Cochran, Director of
Montgomery Parks

FROM: Terry H. Brooks,  Special Projects Coordinator
Office of the Director of Parks

Kathleen Dearstine, Landscape Architect
Park Development Division

Carolyn D. Wainwright, Supervisor
Community Services Unit

SUBJECT: Proposed Park Playground Policy for Donations

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Discussion

Discussion of a new playground development donations policy for parks. Request permission to conduct community outreach meetings with the Montgomery County Recreation Advisory Boards in order to receive comments on the proposed donations policy for playground development and discuss proposed new playground development program improvements for CIP program preparation.

INTRODUCTION:

Over the course of the past few years the Commission has been very pleased and appreciative of the continuing public support we receive in support of our park system in the form of both financial contributions and the donations of pieces of playground equipment and facilities.

Both our local communities and businesses have demonstrated their support for the park system in general and our playgrounds in particular. Examples of some of our most recent, and very successful playground donation projects are demonstrated by the development of Woodacres Local Park playground and Hadley's Playground at Falls Road Local Park..

Donations for each of these playground projects came from local community residents and businesses. The donations received for these playgrounds included equipment, and equipment and labor installation funding respectively. The donations received totaled \$ 60,000 and \$ 1 million respectively.

Playgrounds form the core of recreational activity in all of our parks in many of our communities across the county. Playground use also reflects, in many ways the demographic age, or evolving age changes in our communities as well. When the residents of a neighborhood have young children there tends to be a major emphasis on the condition, design and use of our playground equipment. When a community matures in age and their children grow older their children move on to use other facilities within the parks system. Ball fields are typical transitional facilities. Playgrounds in these communities then become less important. This cycle of communities around our parks with children using our playgrounds is repeated over and over again as the demographics of our communities change over time.

This situation, in some community's triggers pressure on the Commission to deliver more playgrounds sooner than our CIP development schedule can fund. Some communities in this situation develop a donation project to fund a small piece(s) of play equipment in response to either a real or perceived playground user need . On rare occasions some communities obtain donations to fund new equipment for the renovation of an entire playground. One of the major issues the playground program must address is how to accommodate these donations in a fair and equitable process in order to prevent having a disparity among all playgrounds within the parks system.

Staff recommendations for playground development improvements are attached as background information only and is provided as context information for the discussion on playground donations.

The proposed new playground delivery program have been placed in the addendum of this report and will be discussed in more detail as part of our upcoming discussions on the new Parks CIP.

The staff was requested to review the playground development program and develop a proposed policy and/or guidelines addressing the following objectives:

- 1) that the program accommodate and support the public's desire to donate funding and/or equipment for the renovation and development of renovated or new

playgrounds within the Parks System;

- 2) that the proposed playground donation development policy be fair and equitable to all of the residents of Montgomery County irrespective of the financial ability of any given community to fund the development of a playground; and
- 3) that the playground donation policy and program not displace playground development projects currently scheduled in the Commission's Capital Improvements Program (CIP).

In response to these objectives this report proposes a new playground donation development policy designed to support our capital development program for playgrounds.

The attached brochure has been designed and developed to publicize our playground development program in general and the proposed new playground donation program in particular. (*see appendix pages 13 –14*)

BACKGROUND:

Planning and Funding Support for Playgrounds:

The Montgomery County park system contains approximately 242 playgrounds. The Park Recreation Open Space Program (PROS), the Commission's planning policy guide for the future growth and development of parks and park facilities, projects the need for an additional 34 playgrounds over the course of the next 10 years. The Commission's Capital Improvements Program (CIP) provides capital program funding for the planning, design and construction of both new and renovated playgrounds across the county. The Playground Renovation Program is one of the level-of-effort funded Planned Life Cycle Asset Replacement (PLAR) projects in the CIP. The Commission renovates and/or develops approximately 10-12 playgrounds each year as part of our CIP program in order to improve and upgrade the quality of playgrounds within the parks system. The cost of each playground, depending on its size and park service area function can range from approximately \$ 60,000 - \$ 200,000 each and are programmed to last approximately 15-20 years.

Playground Donations:

Staff has experienced two basic levels of playground donation proposals:

Level 1:

Most park playground donations are small 1, 2, or 3 pieces of play equipment ranging in value from \$ 3,000 to \$ 12,000. Most of these types of donations do not require construction permits. The donations are made either directly to the Commission or through the Park Foundation. The playground program manager, park manager and playground inspector review and approve the proposed donations with the consent of the Director of Parks. Commission staff labor is typically scheduled for the installation of the new play equipment.

The playground donation program must be able to guide the donor along a simple administrative review and acceptance procedure that encourages and quickly accommodates these donations.

Level 2:

Another level of playground donations involves the proposed development or re-development of an entire local park playground. In these situations larger amounts of funds ranging from \$ 13,000 – \$ 60,000 may be involved. Playground development projects of this size and scope require construction drawings, and playground equipment manufacturer's shop drawings and specifications. Many of these types of proposals may also contain donated community or business contractor installation commitments as well. In these types of situations construction permits will be required and if a private commercial contractor is used for the playground installation performance bonds and liability insurance requirements become an issue that must be addressed as well. If the donation is for funding a project already in the playground CIP but not scheduled until another funding cycle this project is moved up and scheduled with currently funded CIP playgrounds for design, construction permits, and construction bidding during the fiscal year for private contractor installation as part of our normal PLAR playground development program.

Totally New Playground Donation Requests

If a request is made to accept funds for either a totally new playground (in either the Level 1 or Level 2 categories) not in the CIP or not in the parks system as either a new of planned park site the staff evaluates the merits of such a proposal and makes a recommendation to the Director of Parks as to whether the proposal has merit or cannot be accommodated because of : non-compliance with PROS Plan policies, poor site conditions, budget constraints, environmental restrictions, maintenance problems, the effect of the project on other CIP playground development priorities, etc. If the proposed new playground is found to be acceptable the Department will bring the proposal before the Board for review and approval as prescribed by the Commission's public /private development guidelines. These types of playground donation proposals always go through the Park Foundation for the dissemination of donated funds to the Commission for the purchase and installation of play equipment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A PLAYGROUND DONATION PROGRAM:

Objectives:

Level 1 Type Playground Donations:

All donated playground equipment must comply with the national public safety standards we use in the design and development of our playgrounds;

All playground donation projects will follow a simple donation acceptance procedure where playground equipment guidelines are provided informing the public about the process to use to request approval of the project by the Department.

These types of donations will not be required to follow the public / private development guidelines but may be accepted by administrative review and approval of the Director of Park and Planning. Routine notification of these park playground improvements will be reported to the Planning Board.

A standard playground donation agreement form developed by our legal staff. will be used to accept and quickly process these types of donations.

Level 2 Type Playground Donations:

All donated playground equipment and construction services must comply with the national public safety standards we use in the design and construction of our playgrounds.

All donated playground equipment and /or construction services must be accepted pursuant to a legally binding budget confirmation approval, design approval, construction agreement and liability approval agreement.

These types of donations will not be required to follow the public / private development guidelines unless the proposed playground exceeds \$ 100,000 in value of is found to generate traffic higher than 15 daily trips above the normal rush hour traffic counts surrounding the proposed playground development site.

Playground donations proposed by the donor which are supported by the Department for accepted under the level 2 donations program will be required to present their proposal before the Planning Board for their review and consideration.

Special Note:

All playground donations must not exceed the budget standards established by the Department for each level of park playground. (See appendix page 8 for details).

Exceptions to this guideline may be granted by the Planning Board if the donor and/or the Department can demonstrate that the development of the proposed playground and/or equipment will not adversely affect the equity of facility service for playgrounds across the Park System.

-Proposed Special Playground Scholarship Fund Source-

The following is an experimental idea the staff will explore with the community:

-A donation set-aside, to be obtained from all level 2 type playground donation projects in an amount equal to 5% of the total project cost is recommended in order to establish a special donation account with the Montgomery Park Foundation. The purpose of the set-aside fund would be to provide a special fund source outside of the CIP for communities in need of play equipment that might not ordinarily have the resources to develop new play equipment. Special application criteria based upon demonstrated financial and playground service need will serve as the principal criteria for project funding selection by the Department under this program.

PROPOSED PLAYGROUND DONATION POLICY:

The Commission is committed to providing safe, accessible and secure playgrounds for the children of residents, visitors and workers in Montgomery County. The Commission welcomes public donations to the Parks System in support of the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) for the development of playgrounds.

In order to ensure equity of facilities and services across the Park system and support the development of new or renovated playgrounds the established design and maintenance standards must be maintained. The playground development budgets will be managed in order to ensure equity among playground facilities. These budgets will be adjusted each year for inflation and other cost factors. All donations to the park playground development program will be provided through the Montgomery Park Foundation.

Playground Donation Guidelines:

1. The decision to accept playground donations shall be based upon the recommendations of the Playground program coordinator, park manager, and approved by the Director.

of Parks and Planning.

2. Private donations submitted for the development of playgrounds on park property must Be conveyed to the Montgomery Park Foundation for disbursement in support of play-Ground development and construction.
3. Level 1 and Level 2 playground donations may be received anytime throughout the Year. Level 2 playground donations created to fund the total development and /or redevelopment of a playground requesting construction during the current CIP playground development cycle MUST have all funding and/or in-kind commitments received and confirmed by the Park Foundation no later than January 1 of each year in in order to be considered as part of the Commission's playground CIP for the fiscal year. Partial payment pledges will not be accepted as funds on hand in order to be in construction program.

Appendix Item # 1

The following summary describes how the playground development program is structured and administered, identifies the major issues we face in developing playgrounds, and presents the new ideas staff has developed to improve the awareness and delivery of playgrounds to the public:

The Playground Development Program:

Staff meets with the park managers in the Northern and Southern Region Divisions as well as the Playground Safety Inspectors from both regions in order to prepare a prioritized list of new playgrounds as well as those requiring renovation. Once those priorities are established, staff arranges meetings with each community where a playground is scheduled for new development or renovation during the next fiscal year. Subsequent meetings between the community and staff result in neighborhood approval of the ultimate designs and an explanation of the next steps in the process: construction bidding, purchasing and shipment of the selected play equipment by the selected contractor. A contractor bids these playgrounds for supply and installation. Once the interim and final inspections have been satisfactorily completed, the playground is opened for community and general public use. Staff repeats this community input process for each of the ten-twelve playgrounds renovated annually.

The Playground Development Budget:

The annual amount budgeted in the adopted six year CIP for the Playground Renovation Program for both local parks and non-local parks is \$600,000. The chart below illustrates the Commission's standard for neighborhood, local, recreational, special and regional parks.

STANDARD DESIGN BUDGETS FOR PLAYGROUNDS

TYPE OF PARK	APPROXIMATE BUDGET
Neighborhood	\$35,000-\$40,000
Local	\$50,000-\$60,000
Recreational/Special/Regional	\$150,000-\$300,000

Playground Development Safety Standards:

All of the Commission's playgrounds are required to comply with the Federal Consumer Product Safety Commission's (CPSC) Guidelines for Playground Design and Construction. The Commission follows these procedures by:

- (a) Requiring all of our playground designers, playground safety inspectors, playground equipment manufacturers, suppliers, private installation contractors as well as our

construction staff to be certified by the National Playground Safety Institute, which uses the CPSC guidelines;

(b) Designing all new or renovated playgrounds to comply with CPSC guidelines (with special play area site surfaces, child age separated equipment and ADA guideline compliance);

(c) Requiring that all playgrounds be monitored annually by park playground safety inspectors for compliance with CPSC management and ongoing maintenance requirements. Playground found to be out of compliance with CPSC guidelines are closed and the unsafe equipment is removed.

Changing Playground Designs:

The sole purpose for establishing the Playground Renovation Account was to provide funding to replace play equipment whose use has been depleted. Originally, this entailed replacing individual pieces. However, with the establishment of guidelines by the Consumer Product Safety Commission and increased public awareness, whole playgrounds are now renovated at one time. These playgrounds are unique to each neighborhood, and representatives must have an active role in the design of their playground. Our staff designers work very closely with each group, insuring that the community receives what they wanted and that the new playground is one that can be maintained by the playground safety inspection staff. The designer is knowledgeable about all the latest regulations that have to be met, the prices of new equipment, the site limitations and strengths while maintaining an excellent relationship with the region staffs and the playground safety inspectors to produce an exceptional product. By keeping the designs in house, we are able to keep costs down without compromising the quality of the playground.

Playground costs increase with the number of structures installed or the size of the structures. Every year, playground manufacturers introduce new play equipment with play features (referred to as events) for their equipment. They also develop these new play events at increased prices. Older playgrounds tend to have a large number of equipment pieces. The newer equipment is better designed, creates more play events and uses space much more efficiently than the older equipment. However, local communities, affected by playground changes, often believe they must have the exact number of pieces of equipment in their new playground as they had in the old one. Yet, in most instances the play events remain the same. Therefore, in its meetings with neighbors, staff discusses the intrinsic uniqueness of each redevelopment design. Playground redevelopment designs are based in part on: (1) the latest nationally approved safety guidelines for safety zones around each piece of equipment; (2) the site area limitations; and (3) the budget available.

TYPICAL COMMUNITY PLAYGROUND PLANNING AND DESIGN ISSUES:

Issue 1: Timing

Communities have a perception that, after meeting with the landscape architect, they should see their playground fully constructed within a couple of months. The project manager explains the process at the initial meeting, but they are so anxious for new equipment that the time involved is sometimes not understood.

Solution:

“Montgomery County Playgrounds: Community Involvement in Playground Renovation” is a new brochure to be distributed to the community at our initial design meetings that will:

- describe and give time benchmarks for each stage of the process
- explain why playgrounds get renovated or modified with individual pieces of equipment
- explain what types of criteria are a part of the decision to design a playground (size, accessibility, impact on the community/park, available funding, etc.)
- discuss our safety inspection program
- explain the opportunity for matching funds/donations

Issue 2: Funding

The community is not aware that the Commission’s total playground budget is divided among approximately ten playgrounds a year. Neighbors want their playground to be replaced piece for piece when it is renovated. With today’s dollars, this in kind replacement would increase the supply and construction costs considerably.

Presently, the playground safety inspection staff has no operating budget to replace equipment that is deemed unsafe. When equipment is removed and nothing replaces it, then the calls from the community start rolling in. Unless the playground is scheduled for a *total* renovation, there is no money available to the Region Chief in the CIP for replacement pieces.

Solution:

The playground brochure will provide better information to the general public about playground funding and allocations for each type of playground. Starting with the FY03 CIP budget, \$ (funds TBD) (adjusted for inflation and or other program needs) will be set aside for small, individual equipment replacements in playgrounds not scheduled for a complete renovation for several years.

Increased coordination between the region staffs and project managers will also improve. With a limited budget each year, our entire staff needs to be aware of the replacement schedule and any priorities that have been changed. With the establishment of the playground development guidelines, staff is working more closely as a team.

Issue 3: Equipment Removal

The community also becomes concerned when a piece of equipment, or entire playground, gets removed because we’ve determined that it is unsafe, but is not immediately replaced with another piece. Sometimes a community will say that an

existing playground is unsafe because it wants a new playground. Safety is of utmost importance to everyone involved with playgrounds. The playgrounds in our parks are very well maintained and are given routine inspections. All of our playground safety inspectors are certified and very conscientious about their responsibility of maintaining safe equipment. Some of the equipment might not look new, but it is safe.

Solution:

When equipment is removed from a playground for safety reasons, we will be improving our communication to the community with:

- better signage at the affected park to alert visitors about the changes in the playground and when a new playground will be coming.
- a playground “hotline” (301-650-2890) that would give the caller a recorded message with a description of the current playground projects and telephone numbers for the project manager and relevant park manager.
- a page on the Commission’s website, containing the same information and photos.
- quicker replacement of individual pieces at parks not scheduled for complete playground renovation by use of a special \$ TBD set-aside allocation

Issue 4: Donations

Periodically, communities wish to have a playground online more quickly or on a larger scale than what the CIP provides. More affluent neighborhoods are often willing to raise funds to provide for that playground. This ability raises concerns relating to: (1) equity in playground development, (2) unanticipated work items that might override planned projects, (3) the scale of the project that might create a play space attracting a larger user group than the parking lot can accommodate, and (4) increased maintenance of the playground.

Solution:

Staff proposes a time frame within which the community can donate funds prior to the design phase for their playground. Working with the landscape architect, the design will reflect a plan that meets the requirements of that park, and not exceed them. The donation would be limited to the allocation set in the CIP for that playground. Because donations would only be activated for those playgrounds already on the priority list, they would not have an adverse impact on other planned projects.

Issue 5: Requests for Playgrounds not in the CIP

Occasionally the Department receives requests from citizens or community groups interested in developing new playgrounds not in the CIP. These requests also may involve new site locations or sites not planned for in the park. In some instances these requests may be compounded by the fact that the sponsoring community group has initiated a playground donation campaign. This situation could place the Commission in an awkward position of not accepting funds for a new play area found to be suitable by some community residents.

Solution:

The ability of the Department to support the development of a new playground that is not in the current CIP requires considerable review and evaluation by park management staff. Projects of this nature typically have not been budgeted and cannot be supported in our operating budget. Also, in many instances, proposed new site locations may be considered as suitable by the community but found to be impractical from a park maintenance perspective.

Staff's proposed new playground donation program should address this problem. The new playground donation guidelines provide guidance to the public on how the Commission will receive and review these requests. The proposed playground development brochure, public hotline, and program administrator designation will serve as tools to communicate to the public exactly how these requests will be handled.

A Summary of the Improved Playground Development Program:

In addition to continuing the playground development program as it already exists, we are introducing new elements that should enhance the process and provide greater communication between internal staff and the general public:

- ▶ **broader public awareness**
 - (1) Better signage at the affected parks to alert visitors that a new playground is coming;
 - (2) A playground information "hotline" to give the caller a recorded message with a description of the current playground projects and telephone numbers for the project manager and relevant park manager,
 - (3) A page on the Commission's website that would contain the same information and photos, and
 - (4) A brochure (that will also be on the website) for distribution to the community at our initial design meeting that explains the renovation program and when they can expect to see different milestones in the process.

- ▶ **clearer internal staff communication**
 - (1) Team decision-making on replacement schedules
 - (2) Notification from the region to the project manager and Community Services of the date that an equipment piece is being removed
 - (3) Notification to the region staff that a donation has been offered and involvement in the approval process
 - (4) Notification of other changes to the priority list

- ▶ **provision of the necessary tools to maintain the existing equipment.**

Starting with the FY03 CIP budget, the Department will set aside \$ \$ \$ for small, individual equipment replacements in playgrounds not scheduled for a complete renovation for several years.

Meeting Over Children's Needs

What is the Playground Renovation Program?

Every two years in the cycle of the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) for the Department of Park and Planning, the Playground Project Manager meets with the park managers in both the Northern and Southern Regions of the County's park system and the Playground Safety Inspectors to prepare a prioritized list of which playgrounds need to be renovated. These include (1) playgrounds that have aged beyond the point where replacement parts can be ordered, (2) equipment that has been removed because of vandalism or wear that would impair the safety of the children using the piece, or (3) playgrounds in neighborhoods where the population has changed and the need for new equipment has increased. The total budget allocated in the CIP for playground renovation is divided among approximately ten playgrounds a year.

Once the priorities are set, park staff arranges meetings with each community where a playground is scheduled for renovation during the next fiscal year. The initial meeting explains the design and bidding process, while subsequent meetings become more detailed in terms of a design that meets your neighborhood's needs, the size of the playground and its relationship to other facilities in the park, adequate parking spaces for all park uses, and funding. A final meeting is held to get your community's approval for the ultimate design and to explain the next steps in the process, which includes bidding, shipment and installation.

Your playground's design concept is bundled with others on the priority list for final preparation of the construction drawings by a consultant. As a package, they are bid for supply and installation by a contractor. Once the final inspection has been completed, the playground is opened for the community's use.

How Long does the process take?

2 months: needed for community design concept meetings. The Playground Project Manager hold meetings with community, develops a workable design, makes needed revisions and gets their final approval. This process is repeated simultaneously for each of the ten playgrounds scheduled for renovation within a particular budget year.

2 months: needed to finalize detailed construction drawings. The Playground Project Manager bundles together all the playground design concepts and sends them to a consultant for preparation of the construction drawings. They are returned within two to four weeks to staff review and any necessary changes are made. While the construction drawings are being prepared, the specifications/bid documents are being assembled by staff. Once we get the 100% drawings from the consultant, the package is ready to be bid.

5 months: needed for the contracting process. The project is advertised for one month. The contract process takes an additional three to four months for selection and approval. Once the contract is signed, the contractor orders the equipment.

2 months: needed for manufacturing and delivery. Because none of the manufacturers stockpile the equipment, the custom construction of your playground equipment and its delivery from the manufacturer takes about six to eight weeks.

1 month: needed for installation and final safety inspection. After the contractor has received the equipment, it takes approximately three weeks to install a playground, which includes removal of the existing equipment, the site work, and the construction of the new equipment. Our park playground safety inspectors do a final check before the playground is opened for public use.

12 months: needed in total to deliver a new, safe playground to your Community's park. The inspector will determine which playground within that region has the greatest need and that would be the first one done. Then, all the playgrounds within that geographical area would be completed before moving to the other region.

Suppose just one piece of equipment needs replacing?

We know that children get attached to a favorite piece of equipment. When that equipment gets removed because it is unsafe, it cannot easily be replaced with another piece, especially if it is more than 5 years old. Designs on equipment are constantly changing to keep pace with the challenging activity of the little users. The hardware and various components of new equipment can only fit the new equipment, and manufacturers phase out the old parts and hardware. That's why it's often quicker and easier to replace a whole module of a system, rather than just one sliding board tube.

How safe are the park playgrounds?

Of utmost importance to everyone involved with playgrounds is safety. Whether they are made of steel tubing, wooden beams or fiberglass, the playgrounds in our parks are very well maintained and are given routine inspections. The Playground Program Manager, the Construction Inspectors and the Playground Safety Inspectors are all certified playground safety inspectors and very conscientious about their responsibility of designing and maintaining safe equipment. Who should report an unsafe condition to the Park Police at (301) 949-3010.

Criteria for Playground Installations:

With the high demand for playgrounds, the following criteria was established to manage the order in which playgrounds are installed. Budget and contributions are not the overriding factors determining when a park's playground is installed.



1. The construction schedule would alternate each year between the two regions. If construction starts in the north in the present fiscal year, then in the next fiscal year, it would start in the south.
2. The construction manager and the playground safety inspector will determine which playground within that region has the greatest need and that would be the first one done. Then, all the playgrounds within that geographical area would be completed before moving to the other region.
3. The arrival of the equipment to the contractor would also determine the priority. If the equipment arrived for Playground B before the priority Playground A, the contractor would go ahead and put in Playground B.

Can my community donate money toward playground development?

Periodically, communities wish to have a playground developed more quickly or on a larger scale than what the CIP provides. For the Playground Renovation Program, certain equipment and budgetary standards have been set for each type of park (neighborhood, local, regional, etc.) to insure equity in the delivery of facilities and maintenance service to all Montgomery County residents. The Department of Park and Planning appreciates the generosity of neighborhood residents and evaluates the offer of a donation along the following guidelines:

1. Will the scale/size of the playground be compatible with the rest of the park?
2. Will its scale/size or design attract a larger user group than the parking lot can accommodate?
2. How will the request to design an unanticipated playground impact the priority list of planned projects?
4. What impact will a specially designed playground have on current maintenance resources?

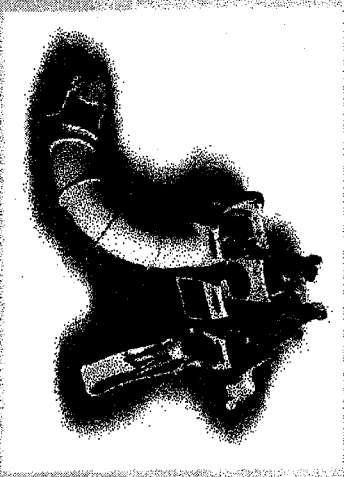
Donations toward facilities in parks are handled through the Montgomery County Parks Foundation, Inc. For more information, call the Foundation at (301) 767-0002 or visit the website at www.montgomeryparksfnd.org

The Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission
Department of Park and Planning, Montgomery County

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLAYGROUNDS



Community Involvement in Playground Renovation

M-NCPPC