

OUTLINE

Parks and Recreation for an increasingly urban and diverse community: Active and Social

Part 1: Existing conditions

Montgomery County has long been a leader in adopting forward-thinking policies for the preservation of land for parks, recreation, agriculture, and resource conservation. M-NCPPC has won the National Recreation and Parks Association Gold Medal for the country's best large parks system a record six times, and the American Planning Association has recognized the Agricultural Reserve as a "Planning Landmark" in recognition of its lasting impact not only on Montgomery County but on thinking about land preservation within the planning profession. Like other aspects of planning, however, the success of our approach to parks, recreation and open space must continue to evolve to meet changing needs.

The story of the Montgomery Parks Department closely tracks the ways in which American suburbs – and the attitudes, lifestyles, and values of their residents – have changed.

- When the park system was created in the 1920s and 1930s, the developers of early residential subdivisions in the downcounty dedicated the land in stream valley floodplains to M-NCPPC. The resulting stream valley parks were an asset in marketing the houses built in these subdivisions while providing a place for water and sewer infrastructure and parkways.
- After World War II and into the 1950s, the county was becoming a bedroom community of a growing national capital and new residents generated a need for organized recreation in park activity buildings, ballfields, and tennis courts.
- The 1960s and 1970s brought a suburban growth pattern of larger lots of single-family homes with backyards grouped by residents with similar income and social structure. This development pattern encouraged the use and dependency on cars, and the Parks Department assumed that residents would be willing and able to drive to recreational amenities designed to serve needs beyond their neighborhood parks.
- In the late 1960s and into the 1970s, environmental policy started taking shape with a better understanding of the impact of suburban sprawl. Growth management policies started emerging and the role of parks in environmental management and resources stewardship received wider appreciation.
- The 1980s saw the introduction of "smart growth" and the benefits of a compact form of development, with park acquisition and the Agricultural Reserve working together as part of a comprehensive approach to land conservation policy.
- Urban parks, initially conceived primarily as "buffers" to protect suburban residential development from more intensive land uses and development patterns (apartment buildings, offices, etc.) took on new significance by the turn of the 21st century with the emergence of demand for urban living. The Parks Department is still in the early stages of coming to terms with the need for parks that serve downtowns, town centers, and other intensively developed areas with opportunities for community gathering and active recreation along with exposure to nature.

As the county works to encourage more intensive growth along corridors, the demand not just for land to accommodate urban parks but for the kinds of park programming and facilities that serve a more diverse population with different cultural backgrounds and lifestyle preferences will only grow.

Meanwhile, the role of land conservation and stewardship in addressing the county's environmental sustainability goals is as important as ever. Urban redevelopment and infill will help reduce the environmental impact of future growth by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and help reverse the damage caused by previous generations of development by incorporating modern stormwater management techniques. Nonetheless, the environmental performance of green infrastructure on public land must continue to improve in order to improve water quality, limit property damage and erosion from flooding, add tree cover, etc.

Over the coming decades, our challenge is to acquire, develop and program parks, recreation, and privately owned public spaces that provide a range of active recreation and community building opportunities throughout the most intensively developed parts of the county while continuing to apply state-of-the-practice environmental stewardship practices to public lands throughout the county.

PART 2: Therefore, Thrive Montgomery 2050 proposes the following policies and actions

- Foster social connection by orienting park, recreation, and related infrastructure and services around community-building, creating opportunities for interaction, and making parks and recreational amenities a central element of complete communities.
- Implement the Energizing Public Spaces master plan and apply its methodology to ensure that all residents in the most intensively developed parts of the county have access to opportunities for vigorous physical activity, social engagement, and quiet contemplation or connections to nature within a comfortable 15-minute walk from their homes.
- Encourage co-location of other public facilities and programs with parks and combine uses of public land to encourage the simultaneous accommodation of multiple needs, including recreation and resource stewardship.
- Promote the health benefits of walking, hiking, and biking by building world-class paved and natural surface trail systems accessible to all county residents.
- Strengthen the role of Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) such that they can provide the same functionality as Public Parks but at the expense of the private sector.
- Incorporate racial equity and social justice when preparing master, functional, and park plans. Ensure that within the park system, race and demographics cannot predict the quantity and quality of parks in a specific area. Amend the Energizing Public Spaces Study area to incorporate Equity Focus Areas and include an equity lens into the priority and deficit calculations.
- Maintain the leadership role of the Parks Department in innovative stream and habitat restoration projects – specifically in the down-county stream valley parks.

- Prioritize acquisition of land for urban parks in areas planned for most intensive development while continuing to protect most significant natural resources through selective land acquisition, monitoring, and ecosystem management.
- Create a resiliency plan for how to design new parks to withstand the effects of climate change but also how to balance adding new amenities and moving facilities out of flood-prone areas to ensure a higher degree of usability and sustainability.

PART 3: The rationale for how these policies and actions will further the key objectives of Thrive Montgomery 2050.

- There are no world class communities that do not have world-class park, recreation and cultural amenities. Look to Central Park in NYC, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, Millennium Park in Chicago, the Sydney Opera House in Australia, or Hyde Park in London to see how important a marquee urban park is to the character of a city. In fact, these amenities are so important to the ability to recruit and retain employees that they are regularly rated as one of the most important factors when businesses are determining where to relocate, expand or launch.
- Well-designed and sited parks can positively form a community's sense of place but the return of investment of a world-class park system is not easily quantifiable. While the investment (e.g. capital and operating budgets) is simple to calculate, the true value of a park system is how impactful a role it plays in individual and community wellbeing
- Multiple academic studies have shown that Parks increase adjacent property values from 5% to 20%. This provides incentive for private developers to contribute to the creation of public parkland or to build POPS within their developments. It also shows that County tax-funded investment in parks and parkland has a high and consistent economic return on investment to the County.
- Climate change has resulted in increased frequency, intensity and/or duration of fires, Flooding/rain events, drought, wind events, temperature. This rapid destabilization of climate patterns jeopardizes ecological stability of nearly all global communities.
 - Parks and natural areas help address the effects of climate change, such as protecting against water-related events, providing trees to mitigating thermal pollution, providing wildlife corridors that accommodate changes to habitat pattern and the availability of food, shelter and water sources, and other green infrastructure.
 - Heat Island affect in urban areas and in lower income communities of color both impacts the quality of our streams but also impacts the health and economy of communities, creating an environmental justice issue.
- Across every indicator for success, from jobs to housing, education, criminal justice and health, black and brown populations throughout the country still see deep and pervasive racial inequities nationwide. There have been important correlations found nationwide between the quality and access to urban parks and the income and racial diversity of the surrounding community.