

Parks and recreation for an increasingly urban and diverse community: active and social

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-NCPCC has won the National Recreation and Parks Association Gold Medal for the country's best large parks system a record six times. 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:

- In the 1920s and 1930s, developers of early down-county subdivisions dedicated stream valley floodplains to M-NCPCC. The resulting parks helped to market these subdivisions and provided a place for water and sewer infrastructure along with parkways for pleasure driving.
- In the early post-war period, Montgomery County's role as a bedroom community for a growing capital city increased demand for organized recreation in park activity buildings, ballfields, and tennis courts. The development pattern throughout these early decades of the Parks Department's history was characterized by subdivisions of single-family homes with backyards grouped by residents with similar income and social structure and designed with the assumption that residents could, would and should drive to major amenities.
- By the 1960s and 1970s, the influence of the environmental movement – sparked in part by Silver Spring's Rachel Carson – led the park system to devote more attention to resource stewardship. The 1980s and 1990s saw the introduction of “smart growth” and increased appreciation for 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 as a tool to protect the environment and discourage sprawl.
- At the turn of the 21st century, the desire to revitalize central business districts led the Parks Department to plan and build more urban parks, initially as “buffers” to protect abutting single-family neighborhoods from more intensive – or simply different – types of development such as apartment buildings, townhouses, or commercial uses.

The Parks Department has built a well-deserved reputation for environmental stewardship, and it has made progress in providing a wider range of recreational opportunities, such as cricket, to meet the needs of a more culturally diverse population. It has room, however, for improvement:

- Our highest density areas are far from places where the most acreage of parkland exists in the county, with lack of alternatives to accessing such parks other than driving.
- Many conservation-oriented parks lack trails and are inaccessible to walkers, cyclists, and transit users, limiting their availability to the greater public.
- Parks conceived as buffers often act as separators rather than gathering places for people.
- Park facility standards and acquisition strategies conceived during a period of greenfield expansion are incompatible with infill development and adaptive reuse of sites.

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 reduce the environmental impact of future growth by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and

help reverse the damage from earlier development by incorporating modern state-of-the-practice stormwater management features. Nonetheless, the environmental performance of green infrastructure on public land must keep getting better to improve water quality, limit property damage and erosion from flooding, and add tree and forest cover.

In addition to maintaining its leadership role in environmental management, the Parks Department must continue to take on new roles:

- Serve residents of downtowns, town centers, and other intensively developed areas
- Focus on social engagement and community building as a central role of parks and recreation
- Encourage vigorous physical activity for people of all ages, abilities, and cultures

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 sound environmental stewardship practices to public lands.

In order to maximize the contributions of parks and recreation towards creating strong communities with lasting value, the county will pursue the following policies and practices:

- Focus on creating high quality urban parks
 - Prioritize acquisition of land for parks in urban centers and other intensively developed places along growth corridors and in complete communities.
 - Offer programs in urban parks to encourage usage, extend time spent in parks and make these spaces centers of activity.
 - Implement the Energizing Public Spaces master plan to ensure that densely populated parts of the county enjoy walkable access to a full range of park experiences.
 - Integrate privately-owned public spaces (POPS) with the park/recreation system to supplement publicly-owned and managed gathering spaces and athletic facilities, using a range of ownership and management approaches to public space.
 - Coordinate land use and park planning to ensure complete communities have access to a range of park types through a combination of public and privately-owned facilities.
- Use park and recreation facilities/programs to promote active lifestyles
 - Include active recreation as an integral element in park planning and design.
 - Encourage active recreation as a key component of POPS in all parts of the county.
 - Provide park/recreation facilities and programs designed to encourage residents of all ages/cultures to engage in vigorous physical activity.
 - Integrate park trails and paths into transportation planning and better use them to connect residents to jobs and centers of activity.
- Ensure that parks and recreation opportunities are accessible and equitably distributed
 - Amend the EPS study area to incorporate more refined analysis of equity in its methodology.
 - Use equity measures in developing capital budgets for park and recreation facilities.
 - Gather data on – and address – barriers to participation in park and recreation programs

- Improve accessibility of park and recreation facilities via walking, biking and transit.
- Make social connection a central objective for parks and recreation
 - Design park, recreation, and related infrastructure and services around building community, creating opportunities for interaction, and making parks and recreational amenities a central element of complete communities.
 - Connect neighborhoods and people to parks with a world-class trail network.
 - Include food/beverage in planning and programming parks and recreational facilities.
 - Provide park amenities that appeal to visitors with different interests/physical abilities.
- Update park facility standards and acquisition strategies to align with infill development and adaptive reuse. 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, community-building, and resource stewardship.
- Maintain high standards of environmental stewardship in park management and operations
 - Reaffirm the Parks Department's commitment to resource conservation, stewardship, and sustainability practices such as innovative stream and habitat restoration projects.
 - Selectively acquire additional land where needed to protect sensitive natural resources, improve water quality, increase tree cover, enhance wildlife corridors, curb invasive species, and achieve other environmental goals.
 - Create a resiliency plan to improve the ability of park and recreation facilities and natural resources to withstand the effects of climate change.
- Integrate parks/rec/public spaces into economic development strategies and land use planning to attract employers and workers, build social connections, encourage healthy lifestyles, and create vibrant places, especially as part of complete communities

These policies will strengthen the role of parks and recreation in economic competitiveness, racial equity, environmental sustainability and an active, healthy community for all

World-class places require world-class park, recreation and cultural amenities. Look to Central Park in New York, Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, Millennial Park in Chicago, or Hyde Park in London and the significance of great urban parks becomes clear. Parks are essential to creating vibrant, economically competitive places. In fact, parks and the amenities they provide are regularly cited as among the most important factors influencing decisions by businesses about where to relocate or expand.

Multiple academic studies have shown that parks increase adjacent property values from 5% to 20%, providing incentives for property owners to contribute to the creation of public parkland or to build privately-owned public spaces (POPS) as part of their development projects. This data also shows that taxpayer-funded investment in parks and related programming and amenities deliver strong economic returns on investment to the public.

The quality and accessibility of urban parks is a basic component of equity in the delivery of public services. Parks are so integral to what makes a community desirable and healthy that

ensuring equity in decisions about which land is acquired for parks in what part of the county and how that land is used is essential to achieving our goals for racial and socioeconomic justice. The Parks Department has made major strides in recent years in incorporating quantitative measures of equity in its capital budget recommendations, and this approach should be expanded to include analysis of programs and facilities run by other agencies, such as Montgomery County Public Schools, the Department of Recreation, and the Department of Libraries.

Of course, parks also play a major role in environmental sustainability. Climate change has resulted in increased frequency, intensity and/or duration of fires, flooding/rain events, drought, wind events, and extreme temperatures. This rapid destabilization of climate patterns jeopardizes the ecological stability of nearly all global communities. Parks and natural areas help address the effects of climate change. Stream restoration and stormwater management projects on parkland protect against flooding and improve water quality. Parks provide wildlife corridors that can account for changes in habitat patterns. Urban tree canopy mitigates thermal pollution, helps limit the heat island effect of intensive development, filters pollutants, and sequesters carbon. These benefits to the natural environment are especially important in parts of the county that have not been the beneficiaries of high levels of public and private investment.

Well-designed and sited parks are one of the most straightforward ways to establish a clear sense of place. They invite people of all ages, cultures, incomes, and interests to gather and interact in ways not achieved in any other location or context. Not only do they foster social connectedness, but with healthy levels of civic engagement and social cohesion, they can act as community hubs and focal points for response and recovery during natural disasters and other emergencies.

Parks and recreation also are vital to improving health outcomes for all our residents. According to the CDC, more than 60 percent of U.S. adults do not engage in the recommended amount of activity and approximately 25 percent of U.S. adults are not active at all. Because 90% of outdoor experiences happen close to home, parks - particularly in urban areas - play an important role in outdoor recreation. Trails for example, are a great way to motivate people to explore public spaces and new parts of the county, expose residents to different neighborhoods and encourage exercise and healthy lifestyles. Access to opportunities for vigorous physical activity is especially important to improve health outcomes and quality of life for people of color, who suffer higher rates of diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity.

In assessing proposals related to parks and recreation and measuring the success or failure of the approaches recommended in this plan, relevant measures may include:

- Number of urban parks: up
- Miles of streams restored, and stormwater runoff treated: up
- Childhood obesity: Down
- Stream water quality: Up
- Urban Tree Canopy: Up
- Additional miles of trails built: Up
- Participation in vigorous physical activity: Up
- Park and recreation patronage/participation by race/ethnicity, language spoken and age: Up
- Awards and other recognition of excellence in urban parks and trails: Up

- Patronage at community gatherings: Up
- Proportion of population within 15-minute walk of three park experiences: Up