Section 1: Framework
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

With more than 1 million residents and just over 500 square miles of land, Montgomery County is a large and complex place that includes rural, suburban and urban areas. The county's gross economic output exceeds $81 billion a year - more than 13 states – and it is by any measure one of the most affluent jurisdictions in the United States, with a median household income of $111,812, yet 21% of households have incomes below $50,000 and 39.8% percent of students qualify for free or reduced meals in our public schools. Our community is increasingly diverse in every sense of the word, with no one racial or ethnic group forming a majority of the population and almost half of residents speaking a language other than English at home.

Montgomery County's parks and recreational amenities – from its urban parks, athletic facilities, ice rinks, and trails to its museums, historic buildings, and conservation area parks – contribute significantly to the quality of life in our community. Surveys of residents consistently show that parks are among the most valued aspects of life in our community. In a 2021 survey of residents, 93 percent of respondents said that parks, trails, and recreation are an important part of what makes somewhere a great place to live.[1]

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) is proud of its record as a leader in the preservation of land for parks, recreation, agriculture, and stewardship of natural resources. We are also proud of the record six Gold Medals the agency has received from the National Recreation and Parks Association for operating the country's best large parks system.

We know, however, that we must continue to evolve and adapt to meet both present and future park needs. As Montgomery County has changed, our parks, recreation facilities, and land management policies have changed in order to meet new economic, social and environmental goals:

- The earliest parks in our system were developed in the 1920s and 1930s as housing developers gave land in stream valley floodplains to M-NCPPC to enhance the attractiveness of new subdivisions and provide a location for water and sewer infrastructure and parkways.
- In the early post-World War II period, Montgomery County accommodated a growing population with facilities for organized recreation, such as park activity buildings, ballfields, and tennis courts. Land use policies and market-led development trends together produced subdivisions of single-family homes, with few apartment buildings or other types of housing. Local parks were provided in most neighborhoods, but the assumption was that residents would be willing and able to drive to regional recreational facilities and other amenities.

---

[1] "Parks/Trails/Recreation" was second only to crime/safety in order of importance in response to the question "When you think about what makes someplace a 'great place to live,' how important are each of the following things?" Source: 2021 Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission Survey Findings Report, September 2021, ETC Institute.

- The park system began to shift its attention to resource stewardship in the 1960s and 1970s in response to the environmental movement, influenced in part by the intellectual leadership of Rachel Carson, a resident of Silver Spring. In 1964, the county adopted "*…on Wedges and Corridors,*" a seminal land use plan that called for focusing development along major highway corridors and in the "urban ring" closest to the District of Columbia. Parks were often planned with the idea that they would serve as "buffers" between residential and commercial areas or between single-family and multi-family homes.
- In 1981 the Agricultural Reserve was established to preserve land for farming, environmental and cultural stewardship, and recreation. The Agricultural Reserve and strategic park acquisitions were among the tools used to implement "smart growth," an approach to land use planning that emphasizes compact development and land preservation to prevent sprawl, improving the efficiency of public infrastructure and protecting the environment.

The early 21st century has seen the emergence of renewed demand for urban living, and Montgomery County has encouraged the development of multifamily housing in established business districts such as Silver Spring, Bethesda and Wheaton as well as emerging and planned centers of activity in places like White Flint, White Oak, and Germantown. The introduction of large numbers of residents into areas previously dominated by offices or retail has generated demand for urban parks with a variety of activities and features in population centers and interest in retrofitting "buffer" parks to help connect communities instead of keeping them apart.

Figure 1.1: Montgomery County Parks Timeline, 1930 to 2010

Each of the roles and functions of parks – from active recreation and social connection to environmental stewardship and access to nature – remains relevant today. While we do some of these things exceptionally well, we have a tremendously challenging task ahead in planning, building, and managing

what the 2017 PROS Plan called the "right park" in the "right place" to serve our community. This means:

- Creating parks that serve multiple functions rather than a single purpose

- Delivering urban parks using an infill and redevelopment approach to add and enhance park sites and facilities in densely populated centers of activity

- Focusing on the specific needs and desires of an increasingly diverse population and of historically marginally and underserved communities and groups

- Serving the distinct needs of senior citizens, teenagers, and young adults of working age

- Making outdoor healthy physical activity irresistible

- Staying abreast of trends in – and leading the way in developing – new park amenities, innovative management tools, and engaging programs

- Creating places that foster community, civic engagement, and social cohesion

- Using parks to tell the story of Montgomery County's history, culture, and natural resources

- Providing sustainable and appropriate access for people to our best natural areas, and

- Maintaining our commitment to environmental stewardship and developing strategies to adapt to and mitigate climate change

The 2022 PROS Plan lays out a vision, strategy, and policies to help Montgomery County achieve these goals.

Parks, Recreation, and Open Space (PROS) Plan

The Parks, Recreation, and Open Space (PROS) Plan is the primary planning policy document for parks and recreation in Montgomery County. Its purpose is to (1) provide the basis for park and recreation recommendations in area and park master plans and the development review process, (2) set priorities for park acquisitions, renovations, and development, (3) provide guidance on recreational facility needs for the next ten years, (4) recommend priorities for preservation and interpretation of natural and historic resources and (5) document agricultural land preservation programs and policies.

The PROS Plan provides input for the State's Land Preservation, Parks and Recreation Plan (LPPRP) and serves as the County's LPPRP. Updates to the PROS Plan have been required by the State of Maryland approximately every five years.

Section one consists of a single chapter laying out the context and framework for PROS. The second section assesses inventory, identifies needs, and makes recommendations in chapters covering parks and recreation, social engagement, environmental stewardship, and the preservation of agricultural land. The third section includes a concluding chapter describing implementation strategies and the allocation of responsibilities among different parts of state and local government and private parties.

Relationship to Thrive Montgomery

The 2022 PROS may be read in some ways as a companion document to the Parks and Recreation chapter of the County's General Plan *Thrive Montgomery 2050*, although the new PROS plan does not depend on Thrive as a basis for its recommendations. PROS is informed by many of the same ideas about parks and recreation that were laid out in Thrive and outlines the policies and priorities necessary to implement these ideas, but it was developed independently through a separate process.

Thrive and this plan both call on the Department of Parks to take on new roles to:

- Serve residents of downtowns, town centers, and other intensively developed areas,
- Recognize social engagement and community building as a basic purpose of parks and recreation, and
- Encourage vigorous physical activity for people of all ages, abilities, and cultures.

The Parks and Recreation chapter in *Thrive* makes the following recommendations, which are also embraced by this plan:

1. Focus on creating high quality urban parks
2. Use park and recreation facilities/programs to promote active lifestyles
3. Ensure that parks and recreation opportunities are readily accessible and equitably distributed
4. Make social connection a central aim for parks and recreation
5. Update park facility standards and acquisition strategies to support infill strategies
6. Maintain high standards of environmental stewardship in park management and operations
7. Integrate parks, recreation, and public spaces into economic development and placemaking strategies

About M-NCPPC, Montgomery Parks, and the Recreation Department

Montgomery Parks is a component of the state-chartered Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, while the Montgomery County Recreation Department is a component of Montgomery County Government. While parks and recreation are not combined in a single department under the same parent agency, we provide coordinated, mutually complementary recreational facilities and programs for Montgomery County residents to enjoy.

Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC)

The Montgomery County Department of Parks ("Montgomery Parks") is part of M-NCPPC, a bi-county agency created by the Maryland General Assembly in 1927. The agency, which is charted by the State of Maryland, has authority over land use regulation, transportation planning, and the management and operation of parks in most of Montgomery County and Prince George's County. The agency improves the well-being of over 2 million residents and countless visitors within this region by 1. Planning for the coordinated and harmonious physical growth and development of the region; 2. Protecting and stewarding natural, cultural, and historical resources; 3. Providing an award-winning system of parks; 4. Creating recreational experiences that enhance quality of life of all individuals; and 5. Planning great communities that are vibrant, livable, accessible and sustainable.

In Montgomery County, the Commission functions as one agency, involving a unique relationship between the Planning Department and Montgomery Parks and governed by a bipartisan Board established by state law.

Montgomery Parks

The mission of Montgomery Parks includes both stewardship of natural resources and recreation, broadly defined, even though Montgomery County government operates a separate Department of Recreation. The recreational activities managed by Montgomery Parks range from hiking, bird watching and mountain biking in natural areas to highly organized team sports, community festivals, classes and summer camps, and programs that require purpose-built infrastructure and equipment and the assistance of specialized staffing or other support. Montgomery Parks manages 37,100 acres of parkland and 421 parks. Most of this acreage is in parks that were designed to serve the entire county but the system also includes land and facilities intended to serve more localized needs. Taken as a whole, the park system provides safe and accessible places to protect and experience nature, connect with other people, and participate in a wide variety of healthy recreational activities and educational programs.

Montgomery County Recreation Department

The mission of the Department of Recreation is to provide high quality, diverse, and accessible programs, services, and facilities that enhance the quality of life for all ages, cultures, and abilities. The Montgomery County Department of Recreation's inventory includes 21 community recreation centers, 2 stand-alone senior centers, 13 adult activity program centers, 4 indoor aquatic centers, and 7 outdoor pools, with 12 facilities located on or immediately adjacent to parks owned and managed by M-NCPPC through Montgomery Parks.

Demographic Snapshot of Montgomery County

With a population of over one million (1,055,110) and 2,543 residents per square mile, Montgomery County is the most populous – and most densely populated -- county in Maryland. It is also one of the most diverse. Non-Hispanic white residents make up 40.6 percent of the population, and demographic forecasts indicate that non-Hispanic whites will represent only 27 percent of the total by 2045. The proportion of Hispanic, black, and Asian/Pacific islander populations have all increased since 2010.

Our park system must continuously evolve in order to meet the needs of our changing community. While a 2021 survey of county residents about parks and recreation showed broad similarities in attitudes and priorities across racial and ethnic lines, some differences were apparent. For example, while strong majorities of residents from every racial and ethnic background report positive attitudes toward – and experience with – our parks, Asian residents were less likely to say they feel safe in our parks, and African Americans reported lower levels of participation in hiking, biking and nature center programs (see chapter 2).
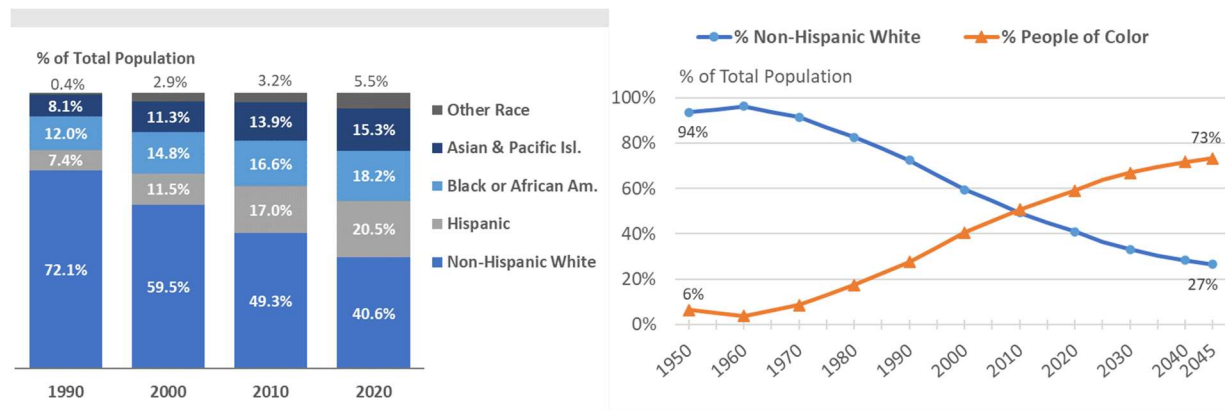
Figure 1.2: Race and Hispanic Origin, 1990-2020 (left) Source: 1990-2020 U.S. Census, U. S. Census Bureau; Research & Strategic Projects

Figure 1.3: Historical and Forecasted Racial Change in Montgomery County, 1950 to 2045 (right) Source: 1950-2020 U.S. Census; 2020-2045 Racial Forecast, Maryland Department of Planning

In addition to increasing racial, ethnic and cultural diversity, Montgomery County is experiencing rapid growth in the size of its senior population. Residents over 65 were the only age group to get larger as a share of the county's total population between 2010 and 2019, and the proportion of elderly residents is projected to continue growing the next 20 years, so our park and recreation facilities and programs will need to adapt to effectively serve older residents.
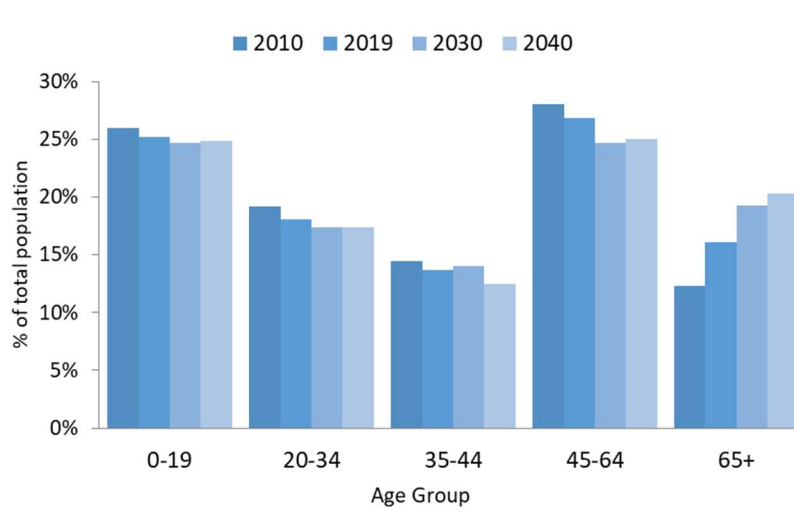

Figure 1.4: Percent of population by age group. Source: 2010 U.S. Census, 2019 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau; 2020-2045 Age Forecast, Maryland Department of Planning.

Social and economic changes also are reshaping the way our residents choose to live. In 1960, just 7 percent of households in the county consisted of one person living alone. By 2018, the proportion of single-member households had more than tripled, to 25 percent of all households. Likewise, the percentage of single-parent households with one or more children under 18 doubled from 4 percent in 1970 to 8 percent today. Meanwhile, the share of households consisting of a married couple with at

least one child under 18 dropped from 60 percent in 1960 to 47 percent in 1970 to 25 percent today. With only 33 percent of households including a child under 18, our park and recreation systems must consider how the needs and desires of our residents have changed. As discussed in Chapter 2, we need to focus on the distinctive interests of teenagers, young adults, people in mid-life, and seniors.
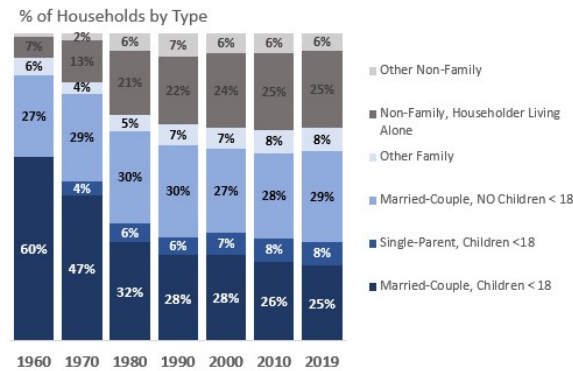
Source: 1960-2010 U.S. Census, 2019 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau
Figure 1.5: Households by Type, 1960 to 2019

The Purposes of Parks, Recreation, Land Conservation and Agricultural Land Preservation

There are probably at least as many *reasons that people enjoy parks* as there are people who enjoy parks. Parks support physical fitness, mental health and emotional well-being.[2] They attract employers and skilled workers. They bring people together, but they also give them places to experience solitude. They protect natural resources.[3],[4] A clear answer to what seems like a simple question, "What are parks and open space for?" can help Montgomery County's decision-makers to define goals, make thoughtful choices about budgets and priorities, and measure progress toward our objectives.

This PROS plan articulates the key purposes of parks as encouraging physical activity, facilitating social interaction, and protecting the environment. Parks and recreation facilities should provide irresistible opportunities for healthy physical activities for people of all interests and physical abilities. Parks and public spaces are platforms for social interaction, community-building events, and the development and celebration of distinctive community identity. Parks and land conservation protect the quality of air and water and offer opportunities for people to experience nature. Agricultural land preservation helps to ensure the economic viability of farming and maintain local sources of food, prevents sprawl, protects the environment, and preserves aspects of our cultural heritage for the benefit of all our residents.

---

[2] Barton, Jo and Mike Rogerson *The importance of greenspace for mental health*, BJPsych Int. 2017 Nov; 14(4): 79–81. Published online 2017 Nov 1. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5663018/
[3] http://usahomepagewww.eastshorepark.org/HealthBenefitsReport_FINAL_010307.pdf
[4] Benefits of Parks in Your Community https://www.miracle-recreation.com/blog/benefits-of-parks-in-your-community/

This PROS plan articulates the key purposes of parks as encouraging physical activity, facilitating social interaction, and protecting the environment.

Land Use Contexts

The brief history of Montgomery County parks and land conservation policies outlined in the introduction of this chapter charted the trajectory of the county from a primarily rural, then suburban, and now increasingly urban jurisdiction. Montgomery County today still has distinctly rural, suburban and urban areas, encouraging a variety of economic activities and lifestyles, and we hope to preserve and enhance the best aspects of each of these parts of our community.

The activities and facilities appropriate to each park are determined largely - but not exclusively - by the land use context of the place where it is located. Therefore, the 2022 PROS Plan redefines park "service areas" using the framework described in *Thrive Montgomery 2050* to provide context-appropriate guidance for park acquisition, development and management. Although the land use context expected in each part of the county is clearly delineated in Figure 1.6, the precise mix of resources and amenities found in each park will be influenced by legacy infrastructure, localized needs, and other factors. The typology in this plan is intended to communicate differences in emphasis expected of parks in different parts of the county as opposed to drawing sharp lines between rural, suburban, and urban parks.
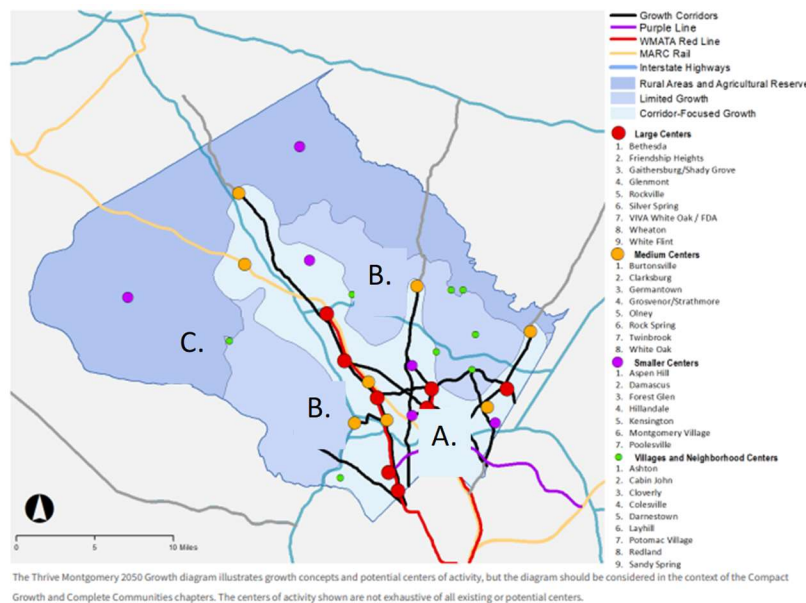
Figure 1.6: Montgomery County Parks Service Areas. Service areas provide context-appropriate guidance for park acquisition, development, and management.

Zone A (Urban): Corridor-Focused Growth area – This zone encompasses the most developed part of the county with the highest-density population and employment centers and the infrastructure to support existing and new development. This zone is forecast to have the largest share of new growth.

Parks and recreation facilities are often smaller but more intensively developed to serve a variety of purposes. Ideally these facilities will be readily accessible by transit, bicycling, and walking. Typical amenities include basketball, pickleball and tennis courts, fitness stations, paved trails, dog parks, and community gardens. Examples of programming may include "Salsa in the Parks," fitness classes, and firepit rentals. By way of illustration, conservation-based programing may include "Weed Warrior" volunteer days to help remove invasive plants, "Flying Squirrels" and "Critters in Crisis."

Zone B (Suburban): **Limited Growth area** *(East & West)* **–** This zone contains primarily suburban, residential communities where limited, organic growth is expected to meet local needs for services, provide a diverse range of housing choices, and increase racial and socioeconomic integration to achieve Thrive's conception of "Complete Communities." Park and recreation facilities usually follow the more traditional suburban model, with athletic fields, courts, playgrounds, large gathering spaces or open lawns as central features, and hard or natural surface trails.,". These parks are more likely to prioritize the availability of parking. Examples of programming may include league sporting events, and tours of historic and cultural sites such as Woodlawn Manor or the Josiah Henson museum.

Zone C (Rural): **Rural Areas and the Agricultural Reserve –** Areas of Zone C are largely dedicated to agriculture, rural open space, and environmental preservation. These parks are generally larger and more frequently classified as Regional Parks or Conservation Parks. Their primary, but not exclusive, purpose is to serve stewardship and resource-based recreation functions. Privately held land in rural parts of the county is generally subject to a variety of regulatory restrictions and incentive programs designed to limit development potential, conserve land, protect water quality, and encourage retention of forested areas. Significant portions of Zone C are in the Agricultural Reserve, and the Parks Department often leases land in this area for farming. Park and recreation facilities can include natural areas, campgrounds, water trails and boat launches, and natural surface trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding. Agricultural reservation related program may include agritourism such as "Pick Your Own" opportunities for visitors to select fresh fruit and vegetables.
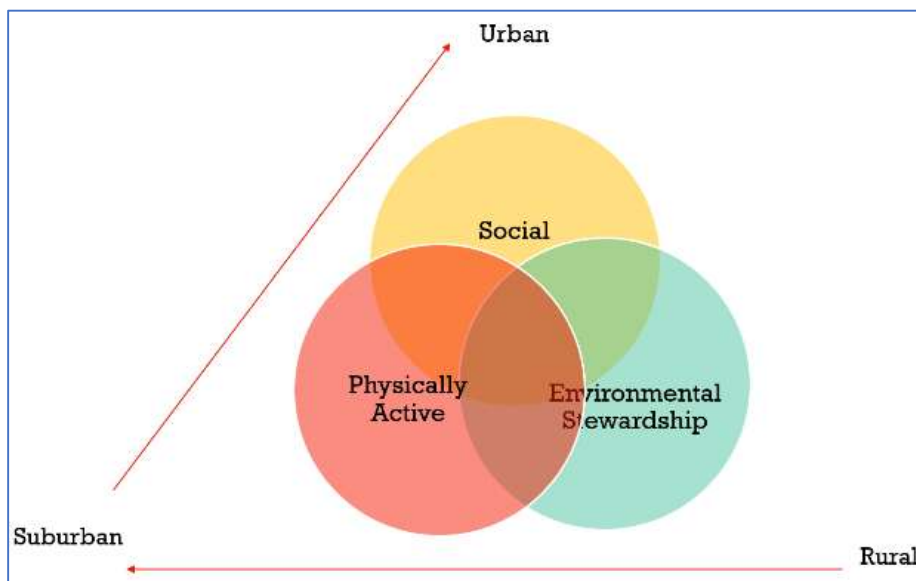
Figure 1.7: While all parks can support physical activity, social connections, and environmental stewardship, there may be more opportunities for certain aspects depending on the land-use context.

Figure 1.8: The scale and design of amenities may vary based on the land use context, even for a single amenity type. This figure shows how soccer fields, dog parks, playgrounds, trails, and stewardship activities may look and feel differently in urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Left: Parks in urban places are more likely to incorporate multiple uses and amenities in a small area than suburban and rural parks. Swampoodle Park in Northeast Washington, DC, goes vertical with a multi-level play structure, which is located next to a dog park and a small seating area. Photo by Darren Flusche.

Right: In service area A, Acorn Urban Park's art installation uses the Newell Street right of way, in coordination with the Montgomery County Department of Transportation, to add space for social gathering and physical activity, expanding space for social and recreational uses in one of the county's smallest urban parks.

Buck Branch Local Park in Service Area B contains a playground, lighted tennis and basketball courts, and a youth soccer field.

Black Hill Regional Park in Service Area C contains a variety of amenities, including a nature center, boat rentals, picnic shelters, volleyball courts, playgrounds, and trails. It shows how even in suburban and rural areas a single park can serve multiple purposes, including physical activity, social connection, and environmental stewardship. Photos: Montgomery Parks

Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve Photo: Montgomery Planning

Q1. Level of Importance of Each of the Following Aspects of Where to Live

by the sum percentage of respondents who ranked the item as *important* (6 or 7) on a 7-point scale (excluding "not provided")

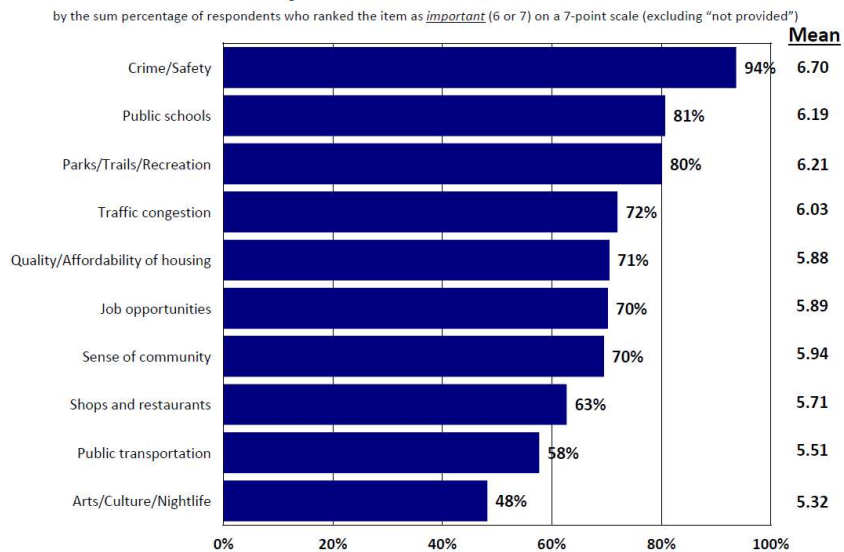| Aspect	Important %	Mean
Crime/Safety	94%	6.70
Public schools	81%	6.19
Parks/Trails/Recreation	80%	6.21
Traffic congestion	72%	6.03
Quality/Affordability of housing	71%	5.88
Job opportunities	70%	5.89
Sense of community	70%	5.94
Shops and restaurants	63%	5.71
Public transportation	58%	5.51
Arts/Culture/Nightlife	48%	5.32

Figure 1.9. Parks, trails, and recreation are among the three most important factors determining what makes a community a great place to live, according to Montgomery County residents.

Importance-Satisfaction Rating
2021 M-NCPPC Survey
Aspects of Parks and Recreation in Montgomery County

Category of Service	Most Important %	Most Important Rank	Satisfaction %	Satisfaction Rank	Importance-Satisfaction Rating	I-S Rating Rank
Very High Priority (IS >.20)						
Access to restrooms	41%	1	37%	12	0.2570	1
High Priority (IS .10-.20)						
Maintenance and physical condition	39%	3	66%	7	0.1300	2
Feeling of safety	40%	2	69%	4	0.1246	3
Selection of programs and activities	21%	5	44%	11	0.1146	4

Importance-Agreement Rating
2021 M-NCPPC Survey
Statements About Parks & Recreation in Montgomery County

Category of Service	Most Important %	Most Important Rank	Agreement %	Agreement Rank	Importance-Agreement Rating	I-A Rating Rank
High Priority (IS .10-.20)						
We need more park and recreation options that are suitable for seniors	33%	1	56%	8	0.1473	1
The park system should focus more on preserving nature and the environment	31%	3	55%	9	0.1389	2
We need more recreational opportunities that appeal to teens	26%	5	53%	10	0.1230	3

Figure 1.10. The Importance-Agreement Rating and Importance-Satisfaction Rating are tools used to help understand the priorities of members of the community. The Importance-Satisfaction Rating compares the importance survey respondents place on a service to how satisfied they are with the Parks Department's provision of that service. This list shows the services ranked relatively high in importance and relatively low in satisfaction (though in some cases a majority of respondents rated the service in question as satisfactory). The Importance-Agreement Rating is similar but measures agreement with various statements about what the Parks Department should be doing rather than satisfaction with its performance. Priorities rated highest in importance by respondents include access to restrooms, maintenance, safety, options for seniors, preservation of nature, and recreational opportunities for teens.

The Overlapping Joys of Parks

This PROS Plan describes the multiple purposes of parks – physical activity, social connection, and environmental stewardship – and the various activities and facilities used to achieve these ends. This chapter has addressed the need for parks to serve different demographic groups and how park amenities vary in different parts of the county.

It would be a mistake, however, to apply these organizing categories too rigidly. Instead of placing limits on what each park can or should do, this framework is intended as a guide to achieving a broad set of objectives. Parks – both individual parks and the system as a whole – must do many things in service of multiple goals. The objective of this plan is to systematically and thoughtfully analyze and direct our parks, recreation, and land management policies so that they meet the needs and desires of our diverse residents and effectively steward natural resources for the benefit of current and future generations.

Parks – both individual parks and the system as a whole – must do many things and achieve multiple goals.

Parks Classification

This plan revises the Park Classification System to simplify and clarify the typology of parks by communicating the differences in experiences emphasized in each type of park and their relationship with the revised PROS Plan Park "Service Areas." This Plan applies the new PROS service areas to guide the intensity and overlap of different facilities and experiences with the park typology – see Figure 1.10 for the overlaps of the experiences in each service area. This typology is intended to provide context-appropriate guidance for park planning, acquisition, design, development, and management.

All parks should provide social, active, and nature-based experiences to the extent practical. This Plan consolidates the several types of urban parks identified in earlier PROS plans into a single category: Urban Parks. This change will allow more flexibility in defining the character of each urban park, including the range of amenities, predominant function, program, and associated context within a hierarchy of public spaces. The urban design vision developed in future master plans or sector plans will help guide the service area, program, key features, size, and design of these parks. In the absence of a plan specifically applicable to a particular park, the EPS Plan Design Guidelines will be used to evaluate proposed projects in light of the needs of the area and of the urban parks system. The revised PROS Plan Parks Classification system retains "Neighborhood Conservation Areas" but recommends against applying this classification to newly acquired parkland.

For more details on the Park Classification, see the Parks Classification Matrix in Appendix 1.
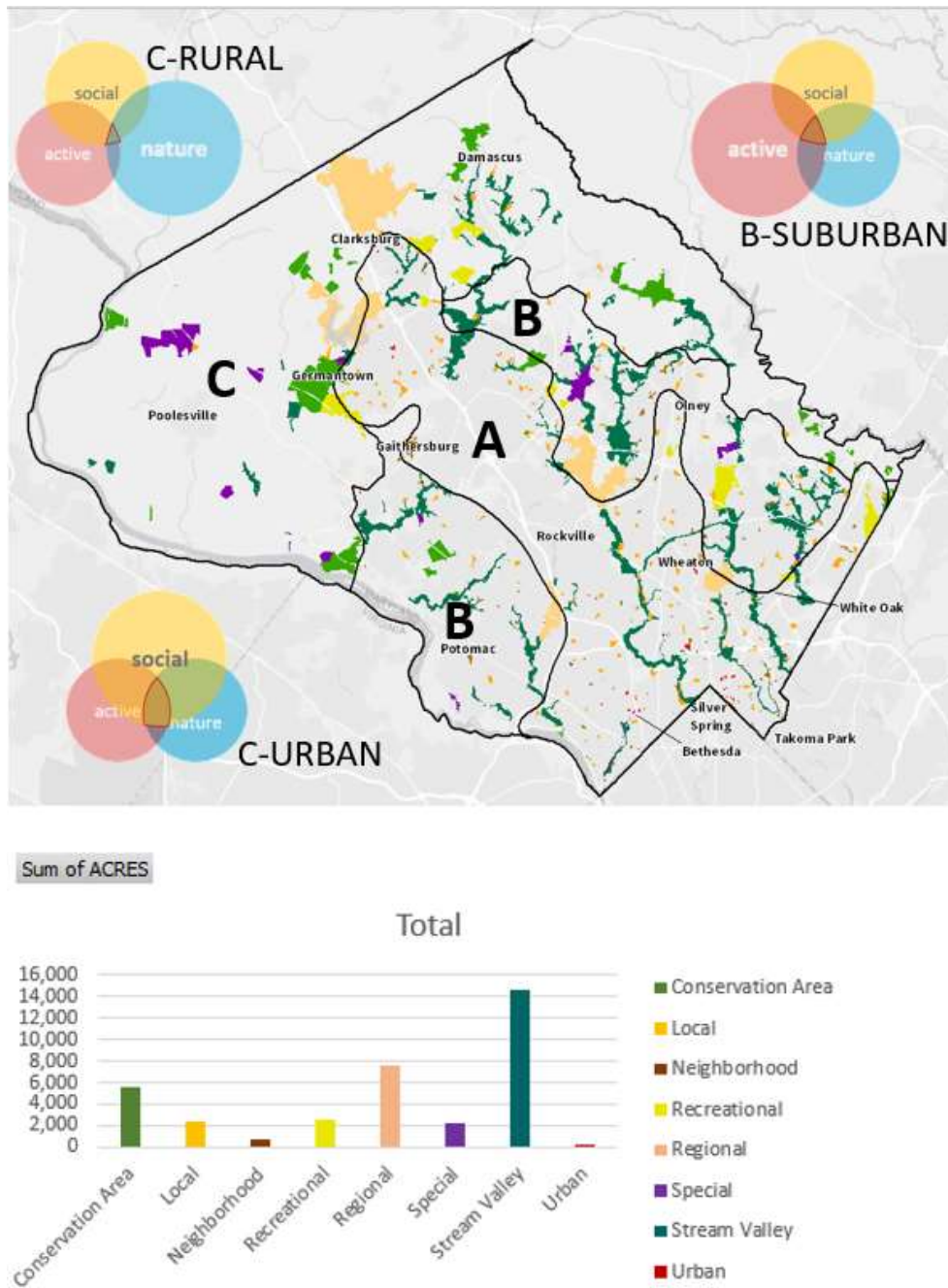
Figure 1.11 - PROS Service Areal, Experiences Overlaps Map and M-NCPPC Parks Distribution Table

2017
PROS PLAN

2022
PROS PLAN

RECREATIONAL ———————— RECREATIONAL
CONSERVATION AREA ————— CONSERVATION AREA
STREAM VALLEY ——————— STREAM VALLEY
SPECIAL ——————————— SPECIAL
REGIONAL ————————— REGIONAL
LOCAL ———————————— LOCAL
NEIGHBORHOOD ————————— NEIGHBORHOOD
CIVIC GREEN   URBAN
PLAZA
URBAN GREENWAY
URBAN RECREATIONAL
NEIGHB. GREEN
URBAN REC. PARKLET
POCKET GREEN
NEIGHB. CONSERVATION AREA*

Figure 1.12 – PROS Plan Parks Classification System

Recommendations

The following recommendations address overlapping and cross-cutting needs of parks. They follow from the analysis, categorization, and discussion above.

1. Develop parks that serve multiple functions rather than a single purpose.
   - Design parks, facilities and amenities, and program activities to support physical activity, encourage social connections, and steward environmental resources.
   - Cluster groups of park facilities together in individual parks or parks located in proximity to each other to provide a full range of amenities and services in every part of the county, with appropriate and cost-effective proximity depending on population density, land use context and other factors.
   - Eliminate redundancies and repurpose space and infrastructure to improve service and add variety in experiences, services, and functions.

2. Facilitate creation of public spaces that accommodate multiple needs, including recreation, education, community-building, and resource stewardship. Pursue co-location, adaptive reuse, joint programming, and shared use of land, buildings, and facilities to advance the goals of the Parks Department.

3. Avoid "partnerships," co-location and shared use of facilities and land that are not in the best interests of the parks system and its users. The use or disposal of parks property or resources to serve private interests or public purposes not directly related to Parks Department programs and objectives should be assessed under the "avoid, minimize, mitigate" approach outlined in A Policy for Parks (attached as Appendix 7).

4. Acquire and develop parks in locations that are served by good transportation options.
   - Focus investment in places that are accessible by walking, biking, and transit.
   - Consider accessibility for walkers, cyclists and transit users when making decisions about where to acquire land for parks and where to locate new amenities in existing parks.
   - Assess residual transportation and utility right-of-way with relevant agencies to determine whether such space can be used, permanently or temporarily, for park purposes.

5. Maintain a commitment to excellence in all aspects of park management and operations.
   - Prioritize a state of good repair and the physical condition of existing parks and facilities.
   - Stay abreast of trends in park amenities, management tools, and programs.
   - Encourage experimentation and innovation and remain open to new ideas.

6. Ensure that parks and recreation opportunities are widely accessible and equitably distributed while working to understand and respond to specific needs and desires of our changing population.
   - Develop a Racial and Social Equity Plan incorporating and building on data driven tools such as the Equity Focus Areas and Energized Public Spaces (EPS) Plan to ensure that the quantity and quality of park facilities and programing are available to all residents on an equitable basis.
   - Refine the EPS Plan's methodology and expand its geographic scope to broaden and deepen measures of equity in the delivery of park and recreation facilities and programming.

- Apply the EPS Plan's methodology and other tools for assessing equity when developing capital budgets and making decisions about types and locations of new park and recreation facilities.

7. Provide parks and recreational opportunities suited to the diverse interests and needs of our residents.
   - Identify gaps in facilities and services suited to specific age groups, such as senior citizens, teenagers, and younger adults of working age.
   - Ensure that residents in urban, suburban, and rural areas all have access to a wide variety of parks and programs.
   - Assess – and systematically address -- cultural, physical and economic barriers to park visitation and participation in recreational activities.
   - Use technology and data collection to generate more sophisticated insights into the use of park and recreation facilities and to recalibrate service delivery strategies to respond to emerging trends.

8. Acquire and develop more - and better - urban parks.
   - Take advantage of infill and redevelopment opportunities to add and enhance park sites and facilities in densely populated centers of activity.
   - Prioritize acquisition of land for parks in urban centers and other intensively developed places along growth corridors and in Complete Communities using the Legacy Urban Space CIP commitment and the Energized Public Spaces (EPS) Functional Master Plan as a starting point.
   - Implement the EPS 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 and 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 communities have access to a range of park types through a combination of public and privately owned facilities.

9. Adapt management, programming, and operations to optimize performance of urban parks.
   - Offer programming designed to increase visitation to urban parks and extend time spent in these parks to make them centers of activity.
   - Refine calculations for Operational Budget Impact (OBI) to ensure accurate operations and maintenance cost estimates for parks in densely populated and high-use areas.
   - Modify operations and maintenance practices for smaller, more intensely used urban parks, including maintenance yard and equipment storage models, equipment types, and staffing approaches.

10. Increase safety and park usage through strategic use of lighting.
    - Develop a comprehensive lighting policy for the park system with criteria including cost effectiveness, energy usage and environmental sustainability, public safety, and effects on wildlife and neighboring homes.
    - Assess needs for lighting to support athletic field needs, trail usage, and evening activities in park buildings or for special evening events.

Section 2: Inventories, Assessments, & Recommendations

Each chapter in Section 2, 1. **describes a key purpose of parks,** 2. **lists inventory and activities relevant to the purpose**, 2. **assesses them**, and 3. **makes recommendations.**

Clockwise from upper left: Friendship Picnic, Wheaton Regional Park; soccer in Aberdeen Park; North Point Nature Conservation Park (Photos by Marilyn Stone); Agricultural Reserve (photo by Montgomery Planning)

Chapter 2: Physical Activity (Parks and Recreation)

Introduction

Parks provide a wide variety of opportunities for exercise and fitness, from fields and courts for team sports like soccer, basketball, and tennis to trails for individual activities such as running and biking. We also offer lower-intensity ways to stay in shape while having fun, including pickleball courts and walking paths. Even programs not designed primarily to encourage physical activity, such as community gardens and "weed warrior" volunteer days, help get people outside working their bodies.

Montgomery County residents see the value in exercise; three out of four say they "definitely will try" to "get more exercise/be more physically active" in the coming year. In addition, 87.7 percent of residents surveyed said they spent time exercising on their most recent day off, and 46 percent ranked exercise as one of their top three choices for what they would like to do on their next day off, making it the most popular option among those offered in the survey.

Support for active lifestyles and physical activity serves important public health objectives in addition to improving the mental and physical well-being of individuals. County government and school system data show that 18.8 percent of all residents -- and 8.6 percent of elementary and secondary school students – are obese based on widely recognized measurements of the relationship between height and weight. Moreover, rates of obesity – and related diseases such as hypertension, high blood pressure, and diabetes -- varies by race and ethnicity. For example, the Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Study found that 15.3 percent of Hispanic students in Montgomery County public high schools are obese, compared to 10.9 percent of African American students and 4 percent of white students.

Parks and recreational facilities can and should play a leading role in meeting the needs and desires of our residents for physical activity, *making our community a healthier place to live.* Perhaps just as importantly, the organized and informal physical activities that parks make possible serve an objective rarely identified as an explicit public interest goal: *making our community more fun.*

Activities, Facilities, Programs, and Infrastructure Supporting Physical Activity

Parks and recreation support physical activity by providing a range of facilities, programs, and infrastructure. Facilities include athletic fields for sports such as softball, cricket and soccer; courts for sports like basketball, tennis, and pickleball; playgrounds, skateboard parks, and swimming pools; trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding; and other infrastructure and amenities designed to accommodate specific sports and games. Some people, of course, are simply looking for space for informal and spontaneous play and movement, and no specialized improvements or equipment are needed to help them enjoy the outdoors and get some exercise. For these park patrons, an open lawn where they can toss a frisbee or a patch of trees for a game of hide-and-seek may meet their needs.

Some people prefer to participate in organized events and activities, so programming is an important part of encouraging people to get off the couch and get outside. Permitted events, such as races or non-

competitive fun runs, walks, and bike rides or organized sports leagues, senior fitness classes, summer camps for young children and teens, and bicycling safety instruction can help entice residents to try out a new active hobby or reconnect with a sport they enjoyed in the past.

Inventory

Park Assets

Montgomery Parks manages ~37,000 acres of land, 421 parks, and hundreds of facilities and amenities.

Park Facilities

- Archery: 2
- Athletic fields: 245
- Basketball Courts: 210
- BMX Track: 1
- Boating Facility - Rentals: 2
- Boating Landing Ramps: 3
- Campgrounds – Full Service: 1
- Campgrounds – Primitive: 2
- Campsites: 102
- Carousel: 1
- Community Gardens: 13
- Cricket Field: 8
- Dog Parks: 7
- Driving Range (Stand Alone): 1
- Equestrian centers: 6
- Event Centers: 4
- Exercise Stations: 50
- Formal Botanical Gardens: 2
- Golf Courses: 4
- Gymnasiums: 1
- Historic Sites: 43
- Historic Structures: 114

- Ice Rinks: 2
- Lakes: 4
- Large Group Picnic Areas: 2
- Miniature Golf: 1
- Miniature Trains: 2
- Nature Centers: 4
- Outdoor Ropes Course: 1
- Overlay football/soccer fields: 41
- Park Activity Buildings: 25
- Picnic Shelters (Non-Permitted): 48
- Picnic Shelters (Permitted): 88
- Playgrounds: 307
- Skate Park: 3
- Splash Playground: 1
- Tai Chi Court: 1
- Tennis Centers - Indoor: 3 (20 courts)
- Tennis Courts - Outdoor: 285
- Trails - Natural Surface: 206 miles
- Trails - Paved: 82 miles
- Trails – Water (Canoe): 5.4 miles
- Volleyball Courts: 12

Sources: EAM, EPS GIS database, and the Parks Acquisition ledger (06/2022)

In addition to the Parks Department's inventory of land and facilities, county residents also enjoy federal, state, and municipal parks along with Privately-Owned Public Spaces (POPS) and county-owned public spaces such as Veterans Plaza in Silver Spring and Wheaton's Marian Fryer Plaza. Appendix 2 provides a consolidated summary of the main facilities by ownership.

Left: South Germantown Cricket Field Opening 2019. Photo by Marilyn Stone.   *Right: MORE Epic Festival Bike Jumping, October 9, 2021. Photo by Art*
Pittman.

Assessment

Parks should do more than provide places where people can play if they choose – they should make healthy physical activity irresistible. This requires well-designed, well-built, and well-maintained facilities that serve the needs of residents with different interests, skills, and levels of fitness. Parks must make it easy and appealing to participate in physical activities. Our parks should create welcoming opportunities for people of every cultural background and mental or physical ability. We should provide or facilitate participation in activities ranging from highly organized to totally informal, from intensely competitive to completely non-competitive, and for both groups and individuals.

> *Parks must focus on the specific needs and desires of an increasingly diverse population and of historically marginally and underserved communities and groups. Parks must serve the distinctive needs of senior citizens, teenagers, and young adults of working age.*

Physical Activity in Urban Areas

When Montgomery County residents were asked what could be improved about our parks, the most common phrase in their responses was "need more." The competition for space in parts of the county that are already developed and becoming more urbanized makes it hard to find room for new athletic fields and other facilities designed to encourage vigorous physical activity. The Parks Department needs to be creative not only in how it acquires and develops land but also in how it works with both public and private partners to offer opportunities for active recreation in urban areas. We should be looking for space for physical activity in or on:

- land purchased by or dedicated to the Parks Department;
- land owned or maintained by other government agencies, such as athletic fields or tennis courts on public school sites;

- land developed by private parties who are willing – or required – to provide public access via easements or as a condition of development approvals; and
- unconventional locations such as the roofs of buildings and parking garages.

Active Transportation and Park Access

In addition to providing more opportunities for physical activity *in* parks we can encourage physical activity in the course of getting *to and from* parks by making them accessible by walking, bicycling, and transit. This means locating parks in places that are well-served by appropriate infrastructure such as bike lanes, sidewalks, and bus or rail lines as well as providing bike racks and making safety improvements in or around existing parks and using appropriate design and placemaking approaches in cooperation with the Montgomery Planning Department, the Montgomery County Department of Transportation and State Highway Administration.

Serving Our Community

The Parks Department must adapt its programs and facilities to meet the specific needs and desires of an increasingly diverse population that includes historically marginally and underserved neighborhoods and groups. We also need to redouble our efforts to understand and respond to the distinctive needs of senior citizens, teenagers, and young adults of working age.

Responses to the Parks Department's survey of resident attitudes and opinions were broadly similar across demographic groups, although some differences of degree were apparent. For example, Black respondents were less likely to say they participate in an individual sport (running, cycling, horseback riding) or to ride a bike, hike, or walk for fun than respondents of other races. By the same token, though, the park amenities most frequently prioritized by Black respondents were natural surface trails and paved trails, choices that were also at the top of the list for other respondents. In other words, residents of all races and ethnicities are in broad agreement on what kinds of park facilities they most enjoy, but Black residents are slightly less likely to take advantage of them. We interpret the gaps between what Black residents say they like about parks and their use of our parks as an opportunity to be addressed by working to make our facilities more welcoming and accessible to Black patrons.

Seniors
As noted in Chapter 1, Montgomery County's senior population is growing rapidly as a proportion of our population. When residents were asked to select from a list of priorities for parks and recreation over the next five years, the most popular answer was *"We need more park and recreation options that are suitable for seniors" (see Figure 2.1).* In addition, 89 percent of respondents said parks, trails, and recreation play an important role in "giving seniors things to do."

Teens
Perhaps not surprisingly, high school students who participated in the Parks Department's survey said that the Parks Department should focus most on recreational opportunities that appeal to teens (see figure 2.1). When asked what they wanted to do on their next day off, the most popular choice was "getting together with friends." The top five amenities selected as priorities by these students were natural areas/wildlife habitat, natural surface trails, swimming pools, and musuems and historical/cultural sites.

Which THREE of the statements in the previous question should the County focus on most over the next 5 years? (Select 3 and rank in order of priority, 1 = most important)

1. We need more recreational opportunities that appeal to teens
2. The park system should focus more on preserving nature and the environment
3. I feel safe in the parks
4. The parks have lots of things to do for almost any type of person
5. The parks are well-maintained
6. We need more park and recreation options that are suitable for seniors
7. The area near my home has convenient access to outdoor recreation opportunities
8. I have a hard time finding information about parks, trails, and recreation facilities
9. I feel welcome in Montgomery County parks
10. Montgomery County parks are missing some of the things that are important to me
11. The parks are run-down and neglected
12. I know where to look for information about parks, trails, and recreation facilities
13. Montgomery County has park and recreational facilities for people like me

Figure 2.1: Summary of priorities selected by Montgomery County public high school students.

Adults

In 1960, 87 percent of households in Montgomery County included at least one child under the age of 18. By 2019, the share of households with children had shrunk to 33 percent. Meanwhile, the proportion of households consisting of one person living alone grew from 7 percent to 25 percent. The social and economic shifts that produced these changes, such as lower rates of marriage and childbirth as well as longer lifespans that have extended the length of time when adults with children can expect to live as "empty nesters, call for the Parks Department to focus more intensively on serving the needs of working-age adults without children as well as our growing senior population.

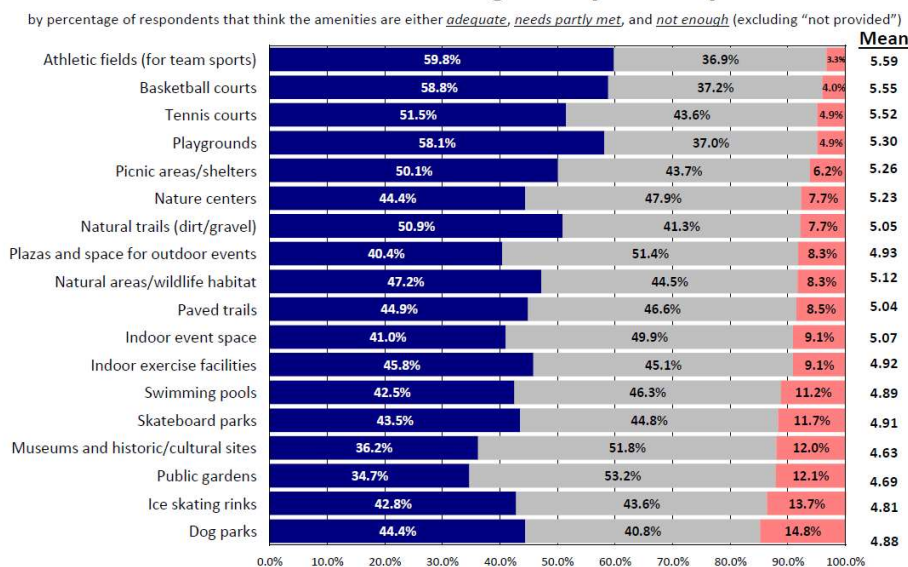## Q7. Level of Adequacy of Each of the Following Types of Amenities in Montgomery County

by percentage of respondents that think the amenities are either *adequate*, *needs partly met*, and *not enough* (excluding "not provided")

Amenity	Adequate	Needs partly met	Not enough	Mean
Athletic fields (for team sports)	59.8%	36.9%	3.3%	5.59
Basketball courts	58.8%	37.2%	4.0%	5.55
Tennis courts	51.5%	43.6%	4.9%	5.52
Playgrounds	58.1%	37.0%	4.9%	5.30
Picnic areas/shelters	50.1%	43.7%	6.2%	5.26
Nature centers	44.4%	47.9%	7.7%	5.23
Natural trails (dirt/gravel)	50.9%	41.3%	7.7%	5.05
Plazas and space for outdoor events	40.4%	51.4%	8.3%	4.93
Natural areas/wildlife habitat	47.2%	44.5%	8.3%	5.12
Paved trails	44.9%	46.6%	8.5%	5.04
Indoor event space	41.0%	49.9%	9.1%	5.07
Indoor exercise facilities	45.8%	45.1%	9.1%	4.92
Swimming pools	42.5%	46.3%	11.2%	4.89
Skateboard parks	43.5%	44.8%	11.7%	4.91
Museums and historic/cultural sites	36.2%	51.8%	12.0%	4.63
Public gardens	34.7%	53.2%	12.1%	4.69
Ice skating rinks	42.8%	43.6%	13.7%	4.81
Dog parks	44.4%	40.8%	14.8%	4.88

Figure 2.2: Level of adequacy of various amenities in Montgomery County

Q8. Amenities That Are Most Important to Households

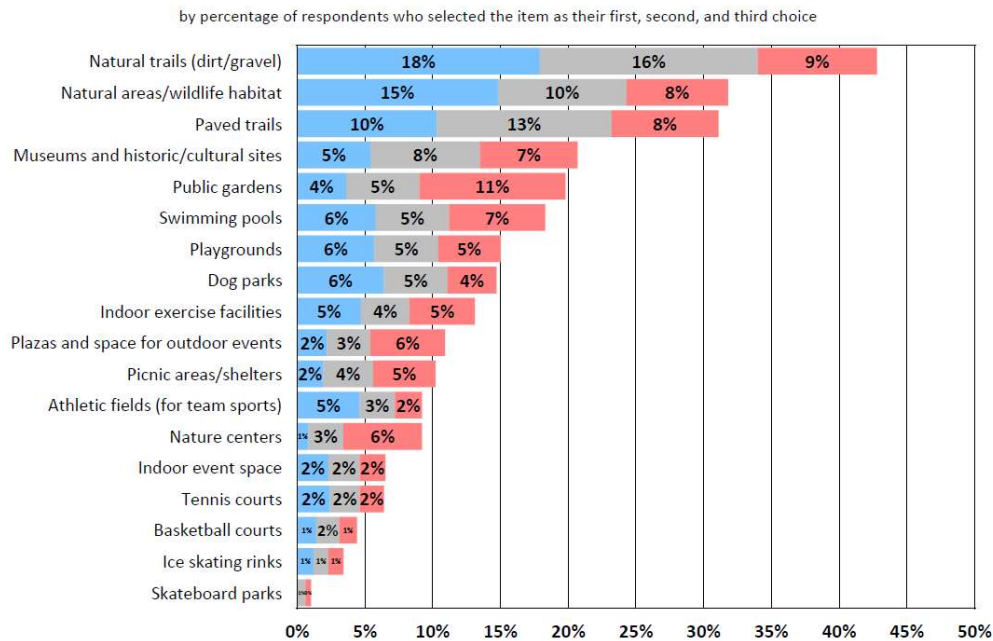by percentage of respondents who selected the item as their first, second, and third choice

Amenity	1st	2nd	3rd
Natural trails (dirt/gravel)	18%	16%	9%
Natural areas/wildlife habitat	15%	10%	8%
Paved trails	10%	13%	8%
Museums and historic/cultural sites	5%	8%	7%
Public gardens	4%	5%	11%
Swimming pools	6%	5%	7%
Playgrounds	6%	5%	5%
Dog parks	6%	5%	4%
Indoor exercise facilities	5%	4%	5%
Plazas and space for outdoor events	2%	3%	6%
Picnic areas/shelters	2%	4%	5%
Athletic fields (for team sports)	5%	3%	2%
Nature centers	1%	3%	6%
Indoor event space	2%	2%	2%
Tennis courts	2%	2%	2%
Basketball courts	1%	2%	1%
Ice skating rinks	1%	1%	1%
Skateboard parks	0%		

Figure 2.3: The amenities that are most important to residents of Montgomery County. Respondents were asked to rank the top three amenities from the listed items.

Facilities for Physical Activity

According to the level of service analysis conducted in support of this plan (Appendix 5), Montgomery County exceeds national benchmarks for the number of playgrounds, tennis courts, and basketball courts per capita.[5] Only six park amenities were found inadequate by more than ten percent of survey respondents: dog parks (14.8 precent), ice skating rinks (13.7 percent), public gardens (12.1 percent), museums and historic/cultural sites (12 percent), skateboard parks (11.7 percent), and swimming pools (11.2 percent). The level of service analysis also identified a need for two additional sand volleyball courts, two skateboard parks, and a disc golf course.

Athletic Fields

Respondents to the survey were more likely to report being satisfied (60 percent) - and less likely to say they were dissatisfied (3.3 percent) - with athletic fields than any other type of park facility. Teenagers were only slightly more likely than adults to say Montgomery County does not have enough athletic fields. There are, however, gaps in service for athletic field users, including competition for access to convenient practice fields during peak hours. A limited number of high-quality baseball and softball diamonds; rectangular fields for sports like soccer, football, and lacrosse; and cricket pitches are

---

[5] This is generally supported by survey data. Seventy-eight percent of respondents say they are satisfied with the quality and convenience of playgrounds, with no statistical differences across demographic groups. Seventy percent of respondents said they were satisfied with the adequacy of tennis courts, though they may not be distributed such that they are equally accessible to all community members. Seventy-seven percent of respondents said that their basketball court needs were met.

available to serve the large number of privately organized athletic leagues. The quality of fields suffers due to the multiple forms of sports that are played on the fields and lengthened seasons of play. The location and design of our fields should encourage use by non-elite athletes and make both formal and informal sports feel welcoming to all.

Trails

Trails have a low barrier to entry. Though they can involve specific equipment like bicycles or even horses, they also can be used with a simple pair of shoes. Therefore, trails are a great tool for making physical activity accessible and available to everyone. Indeed, natural surface trails and paved trails were both among the top three most important amenities to households based on the PROS survey. The PROS Level of Service analysis and the accompanying benchmarking report recommend that Montgomery County add trail miles to meet performance standards and deliver similar mileage as our neighbors in Virginia.[6] However, quality, and strategic location are at least as important as quantity. Parks should emphasize connectivity, safety, trail access (e.g., trailheads and access points), improving access to parks, and connecting parks with trails to activity centers and destinations in the county.

Other Facilities

Montgomery Parks has been developing new tools and analysis to identify the needs for facilities that encourage many recreation activities in the county. For more information on how the department is integrating the need for facilities based on established level of service, demand location, park accessibility and equity, see Chapter 6 and Appendix 5.

Recommendations

1. Use park and recreation facilities and 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 privately owned public spaces (POPS) in all parts of the county.
    - Consider the multiple purposes that parks play and integrate opportunities for physical activity into parks where that was not the initial driving force.

2. Deliver park and recreation facilities and programs designed to encourage residents of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities to engage in vigorous physical activity.

    - Conduct a needs assessment to understand how best to serve the distinct physical activity needs of senior citizens, teenagers, and younger adults of working age.
    - Ensure recreational opportunities are equitably distributed in the county.
    - Provide recreational opportunities for non-elite athletes.

---

[6] Montgomery County Parks has 206 miles of natural surface trails and 82 miles of paved trails. Based on per capita trail mileage, the level of service analysis recommends that additional trail mileage is needed to meet the standard: 14 miles of paved and 9 miles of natural surface. The nearby Fairfax County Parks Authority, which like Montgomery County has over a million residents and has roughly 24 thousand acres of parkland (compared to Montgomery County's 37,100 acres), has 200 miles of natural surface trails and 134 miles of paved trail.

- Use strategic marketing plans that promote programs, trails, and parks targeting multiple demographics, increasing community engagement and advocacy for the park system.

3. Use creative strategies to deliver opportunities for recreation and physical activity in urban areas.

   - Focus on compact multi-purpose sports facilities to provide more recreational opportunities with faster implementation.

4. Explore opportunities to build recreational amenities, such as athletic fields, above structured parking and on roofs of County buildings and underneath other infrastructure.
   Improve active transportation and safe access to parks.
   - Work with public agencies, such as MCPS, Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT), Ride On, and the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA), to create "Safe Routes to Parks" and to other public spaces by filling gaps in sidewalks, trails, and transit service that connect public spaces to neighborhoods, schools, and other County facilities

5. Integrate park trails and paths into transportation planning and better use them to connect residents to jobs, centers of activity, and other parks and trails.
   Continue to develop a world class trails network that connects parks and communities.
   - Update and implement the Countywide Park Trails Plan with an emphasis on connecting trails to neighborhoods through connector trails, trailheads, and extending existing trails.
   - Explore opportunities to support physical activity using pump tracks and mountain biking skills areas.
   - Ensure major hard surface trails have adequate width and amenities to accommodate different users by providing additional travel and passing room for safer trail sharing.
   - Explore creative and effective ways to educate users about trail etiquette to reduce user conflict.
   - Increase awareness of existing trails and develop programs to allow all residents to feel welcome using the trail network.

6. Make strategic investments in athletic fields to maximize existing inventory and address shortages.

   - Where practical, add lights to currently unlit fields and study parking capacity to increase playing hours and access to fields without the need to build new facilities.
   - Continuously reevaluate the inventory of athletic fields and build new fields and develop partnerships to meet community needs.
   - Assess the need for and provide opportunities for sports such as lacrosse, cricket, field hockey, and ultimate frisbee.
   - Focus on providing new athletic fields along accessible transportation corridors and in transit-accessible areas.

7. Explore opportunities to add sand volleyball, skate parks, and disc golf facilities.

Precedents

The following precedents illustrate some of the kinds of programs and facilities that could help bring new audiences into the parks, offer a broader array of physical activities to meet the needs of different types of park users, and make it easier for park users to spend more time being active outside with their friends and family.

A: Tails on the Trails
D: Outdoor Offices
F: Community Health & Literacy Center
B: Park Hubs & Restrooms
C: Urban Park Programming
E: Healthy Aging in Urban Parks
G: Co-Creating Space with Teen Girls

A: Tails on the Trails (Montgomery County, MD)

- Tails on the Trails invites dog owners to join group fun runs and walks.
- Source: Montgomery Parks: Montgomery Parks (@montgomeryparks) • Instagram photos and videos

B: Park Hubs & Restrooms (FDR Park, Philadelphia, PA)

- Park Hubs create facilities that can support multiple functions – permit offices, community meeting space, event space, cafes, welcome centers, etc.
- These staffed multi-purpose facilities make it feasible to support regularly maintained bathrooms to serve the public.
- Source: Fairmount Park Conservancy: Announcing new FDR Gateway designs and city funding! – Fairmount Park Conservancy (myphillypark.org)

C: Urban Park Programming (Washington, DC)

- Urban parks and plazas can function as outdoor gyms when parks departments host athletic programming.
- Source: Golden Triangle BID: Outdoor Activations - Golden Triangle (goldentriangledc.com)

D: Outdoor Offices (Washington, DC)

- With tables, chairs, shade, and Wifi, urban parks and plazas can also function as outdoor offices.
- Source: Golden Triangle BID: Outdoor Activations - Golden Triangle (goldentriangledc.com)

E: Healthy Aging in Urban Parks (Nationwide)

- The National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) Healthy Aging in Parks Initiative seeks to preserve the health, independence, and social connections of older adults through programs that address their health and wellness needs.
- Source: National Recreation and Park Association: Healthy Aging in Parks | Initiatives | National Recreation and Park Association (nrpa.org)

F: Community Health & Literacy Center (Philadelphia, PA)

- The Community Health & Literacy Center in South Philadelphia combines a City Health Center, a pediatric practice, a library branch, and a recreation center and park all on in facility, addressing multiple overlapping needs of the surrounding and diverse population.
- Source: PIDC: COMMUNITY HEALTH & LITERACY CENTER – PIDC (pidcphilablog.com)

G: Co-Creating Space with Teen Girls (N/A)

- Make Space for Girls, a charity based in the U.K., advocates for building public spaces that meet the needs of teenage girls. The organization provides resources and best practices to help communities engage teen girls in conversation about the types of public spaces they would like to see.
- Source: Make Space for Girls: What does better look like? – Make Space for Girls

Chapter 3: Social Connections & Civic Engagement

Introduction

Parks bring people from all walks of life together in public spaces, making them a fundamental part of our democratic infrastructure. Access to resources like nature, gathering places, and recreational opportunities should be available to everyone on an equal basis.

We live in an age of distrust, and civic engagement has been in decline for decades in the United States.[7] Even before the COVID-19 pandemic required us to physically separate ourselves from one another, making the phrase "social distancing" a part of our vocabulary, Americans were feeling increasingly isolated in their day to day lives. Six in ten Americans (61 percent) reported feeling lonely in 2019, compared to more than half (54 percent) in 2018.[8]

Rebuilding a sense of community and shared purpose is essential if democracy is to survive and flourish, and research shows that well-designed parks can be part of the solution. Parks serve a critical and sometimes overlooked role in strengthening social cohesion,[9] facilitating and sometimes even requiring social interaction with both friends and strangers. These interactions can help to strengthen a sense of shared interests and foster active civic engagement. Vibrant and attractive public spaces draw people in and encourage them to interact.[10] As the sociologist William Whyte observed, when it comes to public space, "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people."

Activities, Facilities, Programs, and Infrastructure Supporting Social Connections

Parks, recreation, and open space support social connectivity by providing a range of facilities, programs, and amenities that bring people together. Facilities that are often successful in achieving this

---

[7] The need for civic education in 21st-century schools, https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/the-need-for-civic-education-in-21st-century-schools/

[8] https://www.cigna.com/static/www-cigna-com/docs/about-us/newsroom/studies-and-reports/combatting-loneliness/cigna-2020-loneliness-factsheet.pdf

[9] According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a society is cohesive if "it works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility." The three pillars of social cohesion are social inclusion, social capital, and social mobility. OECD 2011, "Perspectives on Global Development 2012—Social Cohesion in a Shifting World"

[10] https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Cecil-Konijnendijk-Van-Den-Bosch/publication/267330243_Benefits_of_Urban_Parks_A_systematic_review_-_A_Report_for_IFPRA/links/544b6bae0cf2bcc9b1d51ef5/Benefits-of-Urban-Parks-A-systematic-review-A-Report-for-IFPRA.pdf
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Cecil-Konijnendijk-Van-Den-Bosch/publication/267330243_Benefits_of_Urban_Parks_A_systematic_review_-

effect include picnic areas, dog parks, historic/cultural sites such as museums, nature centers and public gardens, playgrounds, trails, community gardens and even skateboard parks.

Public spaces provide tremendous opportunities for social interaction. People of diverse backgrounds encounter each other in shared spaces to share common interests. These spaces include plazas and outdoor event venues, lawns for informal play, relaxing, and events, like movie nights, and seating areas. Parks can also act as community hubs and focal points for response and recovery during natural disasters and other emergencies.

A variety of park amenities support social interactions and development of civic identity, such as interpretive signs, picnic shelters, benches and other people-watching opportunities; public chess and checker boards; bocce and lawn games; and trailheads with "gateway treatments" where groups can gather. Bike and stroller parking locations can encourage chatting. Food truck hook-ups facilitate food and beverage vendors, encouraging sustained visitation and social events. Water fountains, dog water bowls, and restrooms also allow people (and their four-legged companions) to spend more time in parks.

Programs in parks and open space that support social cohesion include cultural and historic interpretation, happy hours and wine tastings, festivals, events, and other "activation" activities.

Parks provide opportunities to gather in public spaces and make social connections. This is a photo taken during "Evening Embers Campfire Series" Adult Night at Germantown Town Center Urban Park November 2021. Photo by Ed Wondoloski.

Inventory & Programs

Montgomery County has a number of facilities and programs that support civic engagement.

Cultural Resources

Montgomery Parks owns and manages 43 historic sites containing 111 historic structures. The park system also includes 300 known archaeological sites and many more that are likely but have not been formally documented and catalogued. The Parks Department manages these assets in its Asset Priority Index and in its Archaeological GIS Inventory, which is accessible to our staff archaeologists. Most of our historic sites are designated or identified in the county's Locational Atlas and Index of Historic Sites, the Montgomery County Master Plan for Historic Preservation, the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties, and/or the National Register for Historic Places.

Museums and Historic & Cultural Sites

From African American heritage and the fight for freedom (Woodlawn Manor Cultural Park, Oakley Cabin, and the new Josiah Henson Museum), to cultural history spanning thousands of years (Native American History), to farming practices of 200 years ago (Agricultural History Farm Park), and the experience of education in a one-room schoolhouse in the early-20th century (Kingsley Schoolhouse), the Parks Department's historic resources tell the stories of the county's people. Through regular public openings, reserved group tours, special events, student field trips, and partnership programs, these sites are accessible and interpreted through both free and moderately priced programs.

Josiah Henson Special Park tour groups and poetry reading in February 2018. Photos by Tony Ventouris.

Interpretation

There are 80 interpretive signs in the park system, including 20 recently added signs for historic African-American cemeteries, at cultural sites, at trailheads and along trail corridors, and in parks undergoing renovation.

Nature Centers

Montgomery Parks has five nature centers:

- Brookside Nature Center
    - o Programs include Maple Sugaring Days, Flying Squirrel programs, Turtle Talks, Harper Cabin programs, Stroller Strolls, and Friday Forays.
- Maydale Nature Classroom
    - o Programs include Frog Watch community science programs, GPS Egg Hunt, Insect Festival (planned).
- Meadowside Nature Center
    - o Programs include Raptor programs, Spanish-language programs, Legacy of the Land exhibit, Native Ways cultural programs.
- Locust Grove Nature Center
    - o Programs include Cider Days, Nature Explorers pre-school, Dino Dig, Theme Weeks, and Hiking programs for individuals with special needs.
- Black Hill Nature Center
    - o Programs include Partnership programs with the Boys & Girls Clubs; Mudfest; Wild Child program; Pontoon boat programs, especially for seniors; Monarch Fiesta; Rainbows, Sprinklers, and Bubbles; and Green School certification consulting.

¡Bienvenidos a la Primavera! Spring Break program March 2018 at Meadowside Nature Center. Photos by Tony Ventouris.

Activation

The activation program is an initiative designed to get people into the parks by hosting unique and engaging activities throughout the system. The program has four full-time employees and relies on the help of part-time staff and volunteers to assist with programming needs. The team operates programs on a year-round basis hosting small, medium, and large activities. The program launched in 2016 and activities have included Touch a Truck events, Sharks in the Parks (Discovery Channel Shark Week films), Butterfly Garden, and Chalk Day. In addition, amenities have been installed in various parks to increase activity, including movable tables and chairs, a loop trail, chess, ping pong, and shuffleboard.

Long Branch Festical at Flower Avenue Local Park on September 11th, 2021. Photos by Ed Wondoloski.

Special Events / Festivals

Montgomery Parks hosts 200-300 events a year that provide community gathering opportunities. Examples include Colors and Kites in Black Hill, the Parks Half Marathon, the MoCo Epic mountain bike ride, the Friendship Picnic in Wheaton Regional Park, Burtonsville Day at Columbia Local Park, the annual July 4th Festival in South Germantown Recreational Park at Newport Mill Local Park, and Opera in the Parks at Warner Circle Park. We also host smaller community events such as 5K races, annual neighborhood get-togethers, and picnics. Each year we host hundreds of sports tournaments of various types.

Plazas / Civic Parks

Social gathering requires inviting physical spaces that can accommodate events of varying types and sizes. Montgomery Parks provides such spaces, including:

- 2 large group picnic areas, consisting of multiple tables and grills,
- 143 picnic shelters, 285 picnic tables, and 54 shelters that do not include a picnic table,
- 70 plaza areas (paved areas with no single defined use),

- 5 amphitheaters, and
- 1 carousel.

In addition, Parks provides accompanying amenities that encourage people to spending time together, including:

- 2,520 benches,
- 20 game tables,
- 16 selfie stands,
- 6 fire pits, and
- 2 pinata hooks.

Volunteer Trail Workday June 2019 at Fairland Recreational Park. Photos by Tony Ventouris.

Volunteers

Montgomery Parks benefits from approximately 80,000 hours of volunteer service each year. Volunteer programs support park priorities and provide opportunities for residents to get to know one another and create social bonds around working towards a common goal. The Parks Department's major volunteer programs and locations are:

- Agricultural History Farm Park,
- Archaeology,
- Brookside Gardens,
- Cabin John and Wheaton Ice Rinks,
- Community gardens,
- Historic interpretation,
- Little Bennett Campground,
- Nature centers,
- Pope Farm Nursery,
- Park Police,

- Park and stream cleanups,
- Trail construction and maintenance,
- Weed Warriors, and
- Wildlife management.

Sligo Creek Parkway. Open Parkways. January 2, 2021. Photos by Marilyn Sklar, Montgomery Parks.

Agritourism

Montgomery County is home to many farms that are open to the public. There are a variety of opportunities to relax and socialize in the agricultural reserve, including:

- Three large "Pick Your Own" Farms (Homestead, Rock Hill Orchard, Butler's Orchard) and many other smaller-scales ones.
- Six farm wineries, including four with tasting rooms.
- Four farm breweries with tasting rooms.
- Two farm cideries – one with outdoor seating and one with a tasting room.[11]

Montgomery Parks Foundation

The Parks Foundation promotes the values and benefits of the park system to Montgomery County residents and policymakers. The Foundation is a fundraising and support organization for Montgomery Parks and provides opportunities for residents and businesses to support the work of the department Among its contributions, the Montgomery Parks Foundation has:

---

[11] https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/agservices/agritourism.html

- Assisted the Parks Department in securing millions of dollars in funding through the state capital budgets during the past five years,
- Secured $150,000 for the construction of the Living Classroom in Black Hill Regional Park
- Contributed $500,000 to the Josiah Henson Museum & Park project since 2017, and
- Managed funds raised by the Friends of Potomac Horse Center for much-needed roof repairs at the facility.

Assessment

Through ongoing nature center programs, cultural resource interpretation, and volunteer coordination, as well as the launch of the Parks Activation program in 2016, the relaxation of rules governing alcoholic beverages in parks and the development of the Nature on Wheels Mobile Nature Center in 2020, the opening of the Josiah Henson Museum in 2021, and many other new and growing programs and activities, Parks has made strides in finding ways to welcome people to parks and provide opportunities to strengthen social and civic connections.

However, the work is just beginning towards using parks to intentionally build "social capital," a shared sense of purpose that can help strengthen efforts to promote respect for diversity, demonstrate the value of inclusion, and build a foundation for greater community trust. As parks play a role in building social trust and inclusion, they can and must also support efforts for racial and social justice and invite people of all ages, cultures, incomes, and interests to gather and interact.

The design, location, and accessibility of our parks influence levels of community cohesion and social interaction. Well-designed and sited parks and public spaces can make it easier for people to meet others and participate in activities. Parks must continue to create physical environments where a sense of community can flourish.

Through cultural programming and interpretation, events, and physical design, park space and programs can and should be used to foster a sense of community identity in Montgomery County. Parks must stay abreast of trends in – and lead the way in developing – engaging programs that foster community, civic engagement, and social cohesion. Parks must also use parks to tell the story of Montgomery County's history, culture, and natural resources. Parks' interpretation efforts need to tell historically "untold" stories of marginalized groups in the county.

Space for Impromptu Activity

Through community input, residents have expressed a desire for "casual spaces" that can be used for relaxation, reflection, and informal activities. These spaces create opportunities for spontaneous, positive social experiences. By encouraging those with diverse ages and backgrounds to gather and linger, casual spaces can facilitate "bridging" through interaction and conversation. Casual use spaces should not be those that are "left over" after active uses are accommodated; rather, they should be purposefully designed and designated as part of the public space system.

Support Services and Amenities

Public spaces should include amenities that make them more comfortable, including seating, drinking fountains, eating, shade, and portable or permanent restrooms. Concessions can include permanent or temporary structures that sell food and beverages, including alcohol.

An analysis of our park amenities based on national standards, a review of peer agencies, and survey data determined that the county needs additional picnic shelters, community gardens, and dog parks to meet the demands of the county's population.

As noted in Chapter 2, in terms of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with amenities that support social connections, more than ten percent of survey respondents stated that there are not enough public gardens (12.1 percent) or museums and historic/cultural sites (12 percent) in the county.

Attractive and Culturally Appropriate Public Spaces

Approximately one-third of Montgomery County residents are foreign-born. Culturally appropriate placemaking can be used to provide welcoming spaces that appeal to residents from many different cultural backgrounds and encourage all residents to gather and interact in a way that builds a sense of community.

This is an important goal, because survey results indicate that not everyone currently feels equally welcome in our parks. Asian respondents were less likely to be very satisfied with "interactions with other visitors" and "Interactions with park & recreation employees," and were more likely to say parks should focus on parking and creating a feeling of safety over the next five years.

Overall 84 percent of respondents said they felt welcome in parks. However, only 80 percent of African American respondents agree with the statement "I feel welcome in Montgomery County Parks," compared to 87 percent of White respondents.

Access to and satisfaction with facilities varied somewhat based on demographics. For example, compared to white respondents, African Americans were *less likely* to visit nature centers and *more likely* to say some of their nature center needs are unmet.[12] Presumably, the lower visitation is a result of the lack of convenient and accessible facilities, as expressed by the unmet needs response.

Pop-up and Pilot Projects

Temporary uses and changes add an exciting dynamic to public spaces and could enable parks to do more with the spaces it has and in partnership with private owners.

---

[12] Overall, the survey results were similar across racial and ethnic groups. The examples provided in the text are among those differences among demographic groups that were statistically significant at a 95 or 99 percent confidence level. See appendix A for the full results. Source: 2021 Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission Survey Findings Report, September 2021, ETC Institute.

Feeling of Safety

When survey respondents were asked which aspects Montgomery Parks should focus on over the next five years, the second most popular answer was "feeling of safety." In terms of satisfaction, 69 percent of respondents said they were satisfied with their feeling of safety in parks, but 9 percent said they were unsatisfied. Lower income survey respondents were less likely to report being satisfied with their feeling of safety than higher-income respondents; and lower income respondents were more likely to list safety as the number one aspect of parks they think the Parks Department should focus on over the next five years. Asian and Hispanic/Latino respondents were less likely than white respondents to report being satisfied with the safety of the park system.

In 2021, a multi-division Safety-in-Parks Committee and sub-committees on technology, trails, "hot-spots," and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), analyzed safety issues and made recommendations to improve safety.

Recommendations

1. Ensure access to spaces that are intentionally designed to support casual, impromptu use for exercise, games, socializing, and connection with nature.

   - Explore opportunities to develop standards for casual use spaces. Undertake an inventory of casual use spaces to better understand their distribution and gaps.
   - Locate or connect parks where social gathering is encouraged. Promote walking and biking to gathering places. Ensure that the facilities and site design are civic in nature and promote social gathering.
   - Enhance spaces with temporary uses and "pop-up" programming such as buskers.
   - Create a strategic plan for park activation to promote social interactions.

2. Provide more support services and amenities for public space users.

   - Explore expanding the offerings or permitting of food and beverage concessions in brick-and-mortar facilities and food trucks in public spaces in high density corridors, adjacent to sports fields, and at locations where special events are regularly held and people regularly gather.
   - Explore legislative changes to make it easier for the Parks Department to issue permits for the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages in designated parks.
   - Design and build new permanent restrooms and retrofit existing restrooms to accommodate year-round use.
   - Expand Wi-Fi to provide public internet access in urban parks to incentivize park visitation.
   - Reconfigure or add infrastructure to support programming, such as events and classes.

3. Strive for more attractive and culturally appropriate public spaces.

   - Gather data and best practices on ways to provide culturally appropriate recreational programming, activities, and facilities.
   - Use parks and interpretive programming and sign to tell the story of Montgomery County's history, culture, and natural resources, with a focus on historically marginalized groups, including Black, Hispanic, Native-American and LGBTQ communities.

- Preserve and support unique gathering places and sites that enhance neighborhood character and reflect local culture.
- Incorporate public art and public performances to celebrate local history and culture to create meaningful connections between people and places important to civic life.
- Sustain an arts and culture ecosystem in parks that enriches the lives of county residents and the vitality of its communities.

4. Provide park amenities that serve the distinct social connection needs of seniors, teenagers, young adults, and people with disabilities and encourage positive interactions among people of different backgrounds and interests.

5. Enhance spaces with mini-park refreshers, temporary uses, and "pop-up" programming.

- Continue to encourage the activation of public spaces and other publicly and privately owned property through temporary activities like parklets, interim parks, special events, seasonal markets, and pop-up events.
- Partner with transportation agencies to expand the use of temporary road closures to create public spaces that can be used for the community at large or for play and special events.

6. Address park visitors' concerns over feelings of safety in parks.

- Implement the 2021 Safety-In Parks Committee recommendations.
- Use surveys, focus groups, and other research techniques to understand park visitors' safety concerns to identify what makes our parks feel unsafe and specifically where and when.

7. Build more community gardens in or accessible to underserved and high-density areas to increase access to fresh, healthy foods and promote social engagement.

Precedents

This set of precedents shows examples of programs and events that encourage people of different backgrounds to come together around shared interests and experiences, and that elevate the cultural and social traditions of diverse groups to drive these programs.

Programs and Events

A: Yappy Hour

D: Craft & Sip

E: Friendship Picnic

B: Breaking Bread, Breaking Barriers

C: Let's Make Sweet Music Together

F: Programs reflecting diverse cultural identities

G: Pop-Up Explorations with Partners

A: Yappy Hour (Montgomery County, MD)

- Montgomery Parks and Bethesda Urban Partnership partnered to host a "Yappy Hour" and Pop-Up Dog Park in downtown Bethesda with live music, food, beer and wine at Elm Street Urban Park.

- Source: Montgomery Parks: Montgomery Parks (@montgomeryparks) • Instagram photos and videos

B: Breaking Bread, Breaking Barriers (Reading Terminal Market – Philadelphia, PA)

- To build social bonds in diverse communities, Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia curated a series of small group dinners to bring people of different backgrounds together, using food as the common denominator. Each event consisted of a group cooking session followed by a meal and discussion between participants to foster connections that bridged cultural divides.

- Source: Alex Styer for Reimagining the Civic Commons: A Taste for Connection. How Food Bridges Social, Cultural and... | by Chris Maier | Reimagining the Civic Commons | Medium

C: Let's Make Sweet Music Together (Philadelphia, PA)

- To test the power of music to bring people of different backgrounds together, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation created a pop-up mobile music studio to act as a "third place" — inviting people to stop, play, and jam together.

- Source: Interface Studio: Let's Make Sweet Music Together – Medium

D: Craft & Sip (Montgomery County, MD)

- Montgomery Parks Craft & Sip series invites residents to sign-up for a crafting table with a group of friends, which includes assorted crafting materials, food, and drinks.

- Source: Montgomery Parks: Montgomery Parks (@montgomeryparks) • Instagram photos and videos

E: Friendship Picnic (Montgomery County, MD)

- Montgomery Parks and the Montgomery County Office of Human Rights host an annual Friendship Picnic in Wheaton Regional Park. The picnic is free and open to the public and brings people of diverse cultures and faiths together to make new friends and discuss ways to build a stronger community.

- Source: Montgomery Parks: Montgomery Parks (@montgomeryparks) • Instagram photos and videos

**F: Programs reflecting diverse cultural identities (Chicago, IL)**

- The Rebuild Foundation in Chicago seeks to create "landscapes of belonging" in communities where decades of disinvestment have created neighborhoods that lack access to cultural amenities and spaces for shared experiences. In addition to space, Rebuild offers programming opportunities for local creatives from the community.

- Source: Reimagining the Civic Commons: RCC_PlaceDrivingEquity.pdf (civiccommons.us)

G: Pop-Up Explorations with Partners (New York, NY)

- Pop up learning space can serve as a reading room, art studio, science lab, targeting underserved neighborhoods. In New York, partnerships with NYC Parks, NYC Housing Authority and NYC Department of Transportation provided the locations for the pop ups, while arts and cultural institutions help provide programming content.

- Source: Street Lab: https://www.streetlab.org/programming-nyc-public-space/

Physical Spaces and Amenities

This set of precedents focuses on physical spaces and amenities that make public spaces more welcoming to different types of users and easier to access, and that invite the public to contribute their own ideas of how to make these spaces more inclusive.
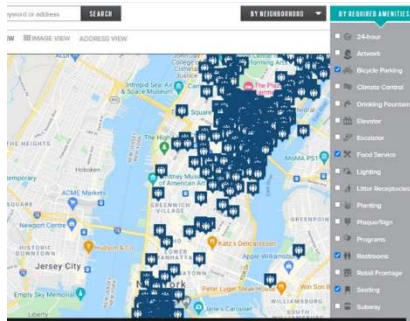
H: Privately Owned Public Spaces "POPS"

I: Welcoming Signage

J: Creation Spaces

K: Challenge Grants

L: Accessible Signage

H: Privately Owned Public Spaces "POPS" (New York, NY)

- New York City has a long-established POPS program that offers a wide range of spaces from outdoor plazas to indoor arcades. Clear communication helps make the program successful through signage and an interactive map that allows searches by location and amenities.

- Source: Advocates for Privately Owned Public Space, The Municipal Art Society of New York, and Jerold S. Kayden: Find a POPS - Privately Owned Public Space (APOPS) (mas.org)

I: Welcoming Signage (Brooklyn Bridge Park, New York, NY)

- Park systems around the country are beginning to design more welcoming signage standards, designed to highlight what users **can** do in the parks, rather than focusing on what they **can't**.

- Source: Cat Kirk Kucharek: Signage: Brooklyn Bridge Park — Cat Kirk Kucharek | Designer

J: Creation Spaces (Minneapolis, MN & Memphis, TN)

- The Minneapolis Parks & Recreation Board is working to transform four of the city's 47 recreation centers into Creation Spaces. The Creation Spaces concept was born out of a desire to create spaces and places for youth in the city to experience different things beyond the typical sports-oriented activities offered at recreation centers. Creation Spaces seeks to reimagine recreation centers into spaces where kids can experience creativity in ways that feel good to them.

- Source: Reimagining the Civic Commons: RCC_PlaceDrivingEquity.pdf (civiccommons.us)

K: Challenge Grants (Macon, GA)

- Macon's Downtown Challenge Fund is an 18-month grant-funded ideas challenge designed to implement the best ideas for transforming Macon into a place that is kid-friendly, inclusive, creative, and greener. The grant is open to everyone – individuals, organizations, businesses, and non-profits, and seeks ideas both small and large related to the primary goals of Macon's Downtown Action Plan.

- Source: Community Foundation of Central Georgia: Downtown Challenge 2.0 - Community Foundation of Central Georgia (cfcga.org)

L: Accessible Signage (Montgomery County, MD)

- Montgomery Parks introduced this communications board at South Germantown Recreational Park to help make parks and playgrounds more inclusive and accessible.

- Source: Montgomery Parks: Montgomery Parks (@montgomeryparks) • Instagram photos and videos

Chapter 4: Natural Resources & Environmental Stewardship

Introduction

Parks and natural areas play a critical role preserving natural resources and wildlife habitats, protecting clean water and clean air, and conserving land. Well-managed and stewarded natural areas support community well-being, encourage and preserve biodiversity, and connect people with nature.

Stewardship activities also enjoy strong public support. When asked how important it is for parks, trails, and recreation facilities to play a role in various aspects of life, 65.6 percent of residents said "protecting natural environment/address climate change" was extremely important, coming in second only to "supporting a high quality of life in every part of Montgomery County" (68.6 percent). When asked what the county should focus most on over the next 5 years, 30.6 percent of respondents ranked "the park system should focus more on preserving nature & the environment" in their top three choices, coming third behind only safety and options for seniors.

North Point Nature Conservation Park 2017. Photo by Marilyn Stone.

Activities and Programs Related to Supporting Environmental Stewardship

Achieving high-quality environmental stewardship, one of the core purposes of parks and strategic land management, requires many different activities including land conservation, sustainable practices, education, and responsible nature-based recreation.

Before and after photographs of a storm drain outfall channel restoration completed 2021 in Watts Branch SVU 3. Photos by Jacqueline Hoban.

- Land conservation and stewardship activities include:

  - public land acquisition,
  - private land conservation easements,
  - local land use management plans and procedures,
  - incentivizing the retention of forests, wetlands, or agricultural lands,
  - avoiding impacts of public infrastructure projects,
  - mitigating impacts of public projects,
  - biological monitoring and watershed restoration,
  - review of development on parkland,
  - vegetation management,
  - non-native invasive (NNI) species management,
  - wildlife management (including white-tailed deer management); and
  - integrated pest management.

- Sustainability practices include writing and implementing a sustainability plan, following LEED standards for buildings, installing solar panels, and reducing waste.

- Continued support for environmental conservation requires public support, which is encouraged by nature-based education in and around nature centers and nature interpretation, as well as responsible nature-recreation including natural surface trails, fishing, and camping.

With significant infrastructure and development pressures affecting parkland, staff coordinates thorough environmental reviews and Mandatory Referrals at the Montgomery County Planning Board when project impacts are determined to be unavoidable and in the public interest. The process imposes requirements for impact avoidance, minimization, and/or mitigation commensurate with the value of the affected natural area or resource. An approved Park Construction Permit is required for any external agency to conduct work on parkland, limiting unauthorized encroachments and impacts. An environmental overlay and Special Protection Area zoning provide for caps on impervious development where specific water quality resources and objectives have been established and protective measures are imposed for sensitive area buffers, inclusive of riparian zone, wetlands, steep slopes, and soils.

Appendix 7 contains the entire text of "A Policy for Parks," which was adopted by the Montgomery County Planning Board in the 1988 PROS Plan and has been re-affirmed and included in every PROS Plan since and guides acquisition, development, and management of the Montgomery County Park System. For a comprehensive description of Montgomery County's implementing ordinances and programs, see Appendix 9.

Weed Warriors, Sligo Creek Trail, Sligo Creek Stream Valley Park, near Forest Glen Road. September 25, 2021. Photos by Marilyn Sklar, Montgomery Parks.

Selected Accomplishments

The 2017 PROS Plan identified three objectives to improve natural resource land conservation. They are listed below along with key actions accomplished since 2017. For a discussion of current resource stewardship goals, see Appendix 8.

Expand Natural Resource Management Efforts

- Implemented 82 stream and outfall restoration projects in 17 watersheds

- Implemented White-tailed Deer population management on an additional 2,543.4 acres of parkland
- Produced a comprehensive Meadow Management Plan and prioritized 2,450 acres of meadow habitat for special protection, 17 of these designated Priority Natural Areas and with assigned asset identification

Create the Next Generation of Environmental Stewards

- Completed a nature center needs assessment
- Opened the Maydale Nature Classroom, a net-zero facility constructed out of a repurposed trailer and built with sustainable, locally-sourced materials
- Created a mobile nature center out of a retro-fitted RV
- Expanded programs:
  - Improved stream clean-up and Weed Warrior volunteer Programs and events,
  - Established partner projects with the Latin American Youth Center's Job training Program,
  - Permitted camp and events for The Young Entomologists Group,
  - Coordinated focused natural resources programs on Take your Kids to Work Day(s), and
  - Implemented activation efforts and events, such as "selfie stands" for targeted natural areas

Continue to Acquire Areas of Highest Quality Natural Habitat

- Created a Top 10 proposed natural areas acquisitions list focused on rarity of habitat, riparian habitat and stream protection, and greenway connection
- Acquired 310 acres of new parkland

The Mobile Nature Center "NOW: Nature on Wheels" visiting an urban park, April 30, 2021. Photos by Marilyn Sklar, Montgomery Parks

Inventory

At 28,000 acres, approximately 75 percent of Montgomery Parks land is classified as natural area.

Since its inception in the 1920s, Montgomery Parks has prioritized stream valley acquisition, and the Department leads the county in watershed protection and water quality improvement initiatives along the 430 miles of streams within the park system. Montgomery Parks monitors the biological integrity of those streams to track macroinvertebrates, fish, amphibians and reptiles. The Department of Parks holds a Federal Phase II Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System (MS4) and multiple Industrial National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits which require measures to reduce the amount of non-point source pollution and untreated stormwater from impacting our waterways.

More recently, acquisitions have enlarged forested parkland. Overall, the county contains 93,281 acres of forest cover, including 9,472 acres of forest interior habitat. There are 213 state champion tree registrants and 4,094 separate forest conservation easements covering 22,055 acres.
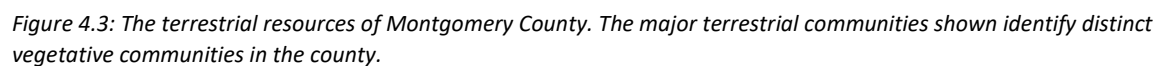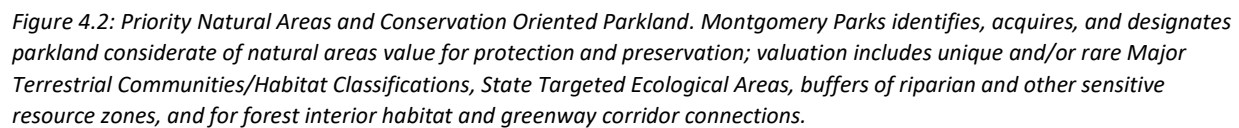
Nearly 15,000 acres of parkland is designated as either Best Natural Areas or Biodiversity Areas. These are the best examples of natural areas for each "Major Terrestrial Community" or provide habitat for known Rare, Threatened, and Endangered Plants or wildlife Species of Greatest Conservation Need. State and Globally Rare habitats, such as Triassic Shale, Serpentine, and Diabase ecosystems are protected through designation as Conservation Parks or Best Natural Areas.

Montgomery Parks manages 45 Pesticide Free Parks and uses Integrated Pest Management and Best Management Practices for the application of pesticides.

Five brick and mortar nature centers and a mobile unit, trails, interpretive signs, and web-based and social media outreach are available mechanisms for public use and appreciation of natural areas.

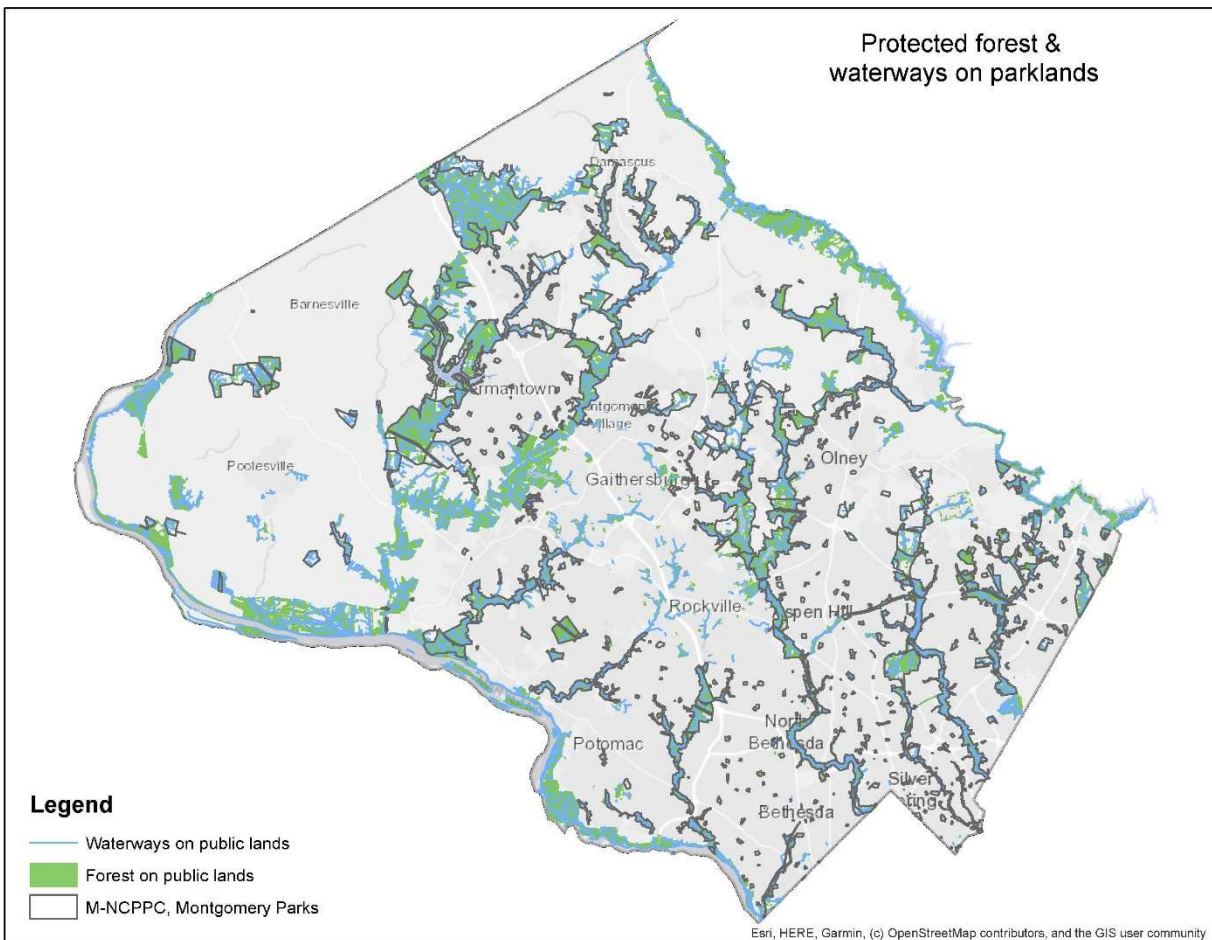| Program Category	Acreage Preserved	Percentage of Land Preserved
Forest Cover	93,281	29% of County Land
White-tailed Deer Population Management on public lands Programming implemented for, and focused on reduction of public safety, conservation, and social impacts caused by deer	40,843	68% of Public Land
Conservation Oriented Parkland, M-NCPPC Designation providing distinct provisions for development and use considerate of water quality protection and protection of natural areas habitat	28,264	76% of Parkland
Forest Conservation Easement	22,056	7% of County land
Special Protection Areas Limits impervious development for water quality protection	20,324	6% of County land
Priority Natural Areas on Parkland, M-NCPPC Special protections and habitat conservation efforts for sustaining rare, threatened, or endangered species and habitats	14,954	40% of Parkland
Maryland Environmental Trust (MET) conservation easement	2,145	0.7% of County Land

Figure 4.1. Land Preservation Programs and Acreage

Figure 4.2: Priority Natural Areas and Conservation Oriented Parkland. Montgomery Parks identifies, acquires, and designates parkland considerate of natural areas value for protection and preservation; valuation includes unique and/or rare Major Terrestrial Communities/Habitat Classifications, State Targeted Ecological Areas, buffers of riparian and other sensitive resource zones, and for forest interior habitat and greenway corridor connections.

Figure 4.3: The terrestrial resources of Montgomery County. The major terrestrial communities shown identify distinct vegetative communities in the county.

Figure 4.4: Montgomery County contains 93,281 acres of forest cover, including 9,472 acres of forest interior habitat, and Montgomery Parks stewards 430 miles of stream.

Assessment

Montgomery Parks has developed and implemented, arguably, the most progressive environmental stewardship standards and initiatives of all counties in the state and mid-Atlantic region. However, there is room for improvement and for adaptation to changing environments, science, and lessons learned. Climate change and human development's effects on habitat, as well as increasing social disconnection in society and continued physical health challenges, call for a clear strategy for natural areas in the county.

We can make a stronger connection between stewardship activities and the social benefits of parks and better integrate recreation into environmental management. In the past, we have viewed these goals as binary – parks are for recreation OR stewardship – but we now recognize that carefully managed resource-based recreation and environmental stewardship can and should be complementary activities that cultivate public support for additional conservation.

As we carefully integrate human activities into resource areas, we also need to better integrate resource management into developed areas of the county with stormwater management practices, tree planting, NNI management, and urban green spaces.

As described above, Parks has made great progress in acquiring high priority properties for parkland and conducting environmental improvement, such as stream restoration. Yet, in a world of population growth, development, and climate change, we need to continue to innovate and expand our efforts.

Commitment to Natural Resources Stewardship

Thrive 2050 and this plan both reaffirm the county's commitment toward natural resources stewardship. Industry standards and requirements for natural resources stewardship and sustainability practices are growing far more rapidly than the resources required to maintain those standards. Much of the park system's natural areas and infrastructure were acquired and developed at a time when it was believed that these things were self-sustaining. Further, aging utility infrastructure throughout the county is rapidly coming to the end of its service life and damaging natural resources as it degrades in place. Habitat is under considerable stress from sprawl development, invasive plants and animals, habitat loss, and climate change. All these anthropogenic stressors require considerable intervention if desirable conditions or species are to be maintained or achieved.

Acquisitions

Healthy streams and aquatic resources are critical to maintaining unique native biodiversity and high-quality natural resource-based recreational amenities. Watersheds can be protected by selectively expanding and enhancing stream riparian buffers, preserving headwater areas and natural drainage, prioritizing wetland habitat for valuable ecosystem services, and minimizing impervious development in the most sensitive areas. Completing and connecting the existing network of green corridors will facilitate wildlife passage and migration through the region while providing meaningful opportunities to expand access to natural resource-based recreation.

Diversity in plant and animal species is necessary to provide rich habitat for wildlife. Montgomery Parks should refine its habitat assessment techniques to better quantify special characteristics and conditions, and prioritize based on determined value, resources, and management objectives. Currently, Montgomery Parks relies on Major Terrestrial Communities, the Grace Brush Vegetation Map of Maryland, documented rare, threatened, and endangered species, and field truthing to identify habitat worthy of special designation and protection. Staff are currently evaluating the National Habitat Classification System as an additional tool for refining such habitat identification.

Climate Resilience

Adapting to climate change is an increasing priority for the county and Parks should:

- Build resilience to the increase in frequency, intensity and duration of fires, major rain and flooding, drought, high winds, temperature changes, and new wildlife patterns resulting from climate change,
- Use available open space as meadows, reforestation areas, ground mounted solar arrays, or farms to help mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change, and

- Take measures to minimize and offset greenhouse gas and carbon emissions, control energy use, employ LEED design/construction techniques, reduce waste, manage fleet and equipment emissions, and minimize water consumption.

Appropriate Access to Natural Areas

Conservation of natural areas has undisputed ecological benefits, and allowing appropriate access to these areas provides physical and mental health benefits to human beings.. Montgomery County has made significant progress in stewarding natural resources, but well-managed public access is sometimes lacking. Some conservation-oriented parks lack trails and are inaccessible to people walking, bicycling, and using transit, limiting their availability to the public.

A thoughtful strategy for placing trails in both regional and conservation-oriented parks can encourage vigorous physical activity for people of all ages, abilities, and cultures while still achieving stewardship objectives. In fact, exposing the public to the joys and wonders of the natural environment is critical to fostering public support for ongoing and expanded stewardship activities.

Public Access to Water

Access for water-based recreation activities such as canoeing, kayaking, boating, and fishing is available in several locations on land owned or managed by state and federal agencies, M-NCPPC, and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC*)* (see – Appendix 6, Figure 6.2).

The C & O Canal parallels and adjoins the Potomac River, allowing access to water-based recreation from federal parkland. Clopper Lake, located within the Seneca Creek State Park, provides water-based recreation on state property, and M-NCPPC provides similar opportunities at Little Seneca Lake at Black Hill Regional Park and at Lake Needwood at Rock Creek Regional Park. Lake Frank, which is also located at Rock Creek Regional Park has water access limited to shoreline fishing only. WSSC provides water access at the Triadelphia Reservoir located between Montgomery County and Howard County.

Fishing in Montgomery Parks is generally allowed subject to compliance with licensing and other requirements (see Policy for Parks in appendix). Boating requires a permit and compliance with all applicable Park Directives and local, state, and federal law. Montgomery Parks is currently working with DNR to establish sites for the *Maryland Fly Fishing Trail* that will introduce people to nearby public access points, support local and small businesses, and increase visitation to nearby state and county parks and historic sites of interest.

Strategy & Measurement

The benefits of strong environmental stewardship go beyond the obvious and measurable results like clean streams and lakes, healthy and diverse ecosystems that support a variety of plants and animals, and improved air quality. For example, stormwater management projects that reduce the flow of pollutants into our waterways – including stream and outfall restoration – also mitigate flooding caused by runoff from impervious surfaces like parking lots, streets, and roofs. A successful deer population management program protects forest ecosystems and reduces the number of vehicle crashes, saving

lives. These kinds of economic and quality of life benefits support our stewardship mission and should also be measured and understood.

As we measure the impact of our stewardship efforts, we should connect the science and outcome measures to clearly delineated desired results related to natural resources and human quality of life outcomes.

Recommendations

Over the next five years, natural resource stewardship activities should:

1. Reaffirm the Parks Department's commitment to resource conservation, stewardship, and sustainability practices such as innovative stream and habitat restoration projects.
   - Assess the department's analytical tools and standards and practice for resource monitoring and management to ensure that they reflect state-of-the-practice understanding of the most effective and efficient means of achieving stewardship goals.
   - Ensure environmental and sustainability services improve public health, allow for opportunities for nature interpretation and education, and correct environmental injustices within equity and/or densely populated areas.
   - Develop coordinated strategies with other agencies, neighboring jurisdictions, and relevant stakeholders to target meaningful stormwater treatment opportunities *before* stormwater reaches parkland. Point sources of stormwater discharge into stream channels on parkland, such as pipes that direct stormwater near or into park streams, should be identified and eliminated through state-of-the-art stormwater management, outfall enhancements, stream restoration and other mitigation techniques.

2. 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.
   - A priority list of natural resource-based land acquisition targets should be developed, adjusted, and pursued to protect sensitive watersheds, preserve unique and rare habitats, complete critical wildlife corridor connections, and connect communities to natural areas.

3. Create a resiliency plan to improve the ability of park and recreation facilities and natural resources to withstand the effects of climate change. This plan should align with the County Climate Action Plan and Parks Sustainability Plan.

4. Provide appropriate public access to natural areas to support public health and foster public support for resource conservation.
   - Continue to allow and develop natural surface trails in conservation-oriented parks and encourage transit access to all parks where feasible.

5. Develop a Stewardship Strategic Plan for the next five years.
   - Articulate a clear theory about the desired ends for natural stewardship activities.

- Establish program priorities and identify clear steps and program activities, within existing financial resources, to achieve the stated objectives.
- Establish metrics tied to outcomes and measure projects accordingly.

Precedents

The following precedents offer ideas for how we can improve the ecosystems of smaller urban parks, help increase resilience to a changing climate and extreme weather events and raise awareness and engage visitors in new and unexpected ways around environmental issues.

A: Urban Wood Sale
D: Park Camping with Park Rangers
B: Inner Belt National Forest
E: Miyawaki Forests
G: iNaturalist – Nature exploration app
C: Public Cooling Areas
F: Pop-Up Nature Center
H: Community Boat Share: Bartram's Garden

A: Urban Wood Sale (Montgomery County, MD)

- Each year, Montgomery Parks removes hundreds of hazardous dead and dying trees from the park system. Through the department's Green Waste Recycling Program, some of the removed trees are turned into wood products that are reused within the parks department, such as mulch, compost, and lumber. The Wood Sale brings public awareness to urban wood recycling and what Montgomery Parks is doing to produce sustainable wood products that are used in our park operations

- Source: Montgomery Parks: Montgomery Parks (@montgomeryparks) • Instagram photos and videos

B: Inner Belt National Forest (Akron, OH)

- The Innerbelt National Forest is a temporary installation of trees, trails and seating areas on an adjacent section of a decommissioned freeway to test the idea and create stewardship for a permanent green public space in the long-term redevelopment of the freeway. The space provides a place for learning, play, introspection, and connection with an outdoor museum, kids construction area, state, observation deck and outdoor classroom.

- Source: The Devil Strip: The Innerbelt National Forest and how cities plan for the future | THE DEVIL STRIP

C: Public Cooling Areas (Charlotte, NC)

- The City of Charlotte recently released a climate-ready action plan for creating a more climate-resilient and just city. One of the recommended actions of this approach was to create public cooling areas to provide relief during extreme heat events. These cooling areas, which include spraygrounds, pools, and green spaces covered by dense tree canopy, would allow residents to still enjoy the outdoors and stay active in extreme heat events, and are targeted for investment in the most vulnerable neighborhoods in the City.

- Source: Center for American Progress: CharlotteClimate-report1.pdf (americanprogress.org)

D: Park Camping with Park Rangers (New York, NY)

- NYC Parks hosts overnight camping events in their park system, facilitated by their Urban Park Rangers. The program allows participants to pitch a tent under the stars with Urban Park Rangers acting as hosts and guides. Camping events also include guided nighttime hikes, storytelling, camp fires and s'mores!

- Source: NYC Parks: Family Camping with the Urban Park Rangers : NYC Parks (nycgovparks.org)

E: Miyawaki Forests (Worldwide)

- Named for the Japanese botanist who first developed the concept, a Miyawaki forest is a very densely planted, biodiverse pocket forest designed to bring the ecological benefits of a healthy, thriving forest to the small footprints of urban public spaces. The forest pictured in Cambridge's Danehy Park contains approximately 1,400 trees and 32 native species of plants.

- Source: Boston.com: The Northeast's first Miyawaki forest is growing in Cambridge. Here's what that means. (boston.com)

F: Pop-Up Nature Center (Akron, OH)

- The Summit Lake Pop-Up Nature Center by Summit Metro Parks in Akron, OH sought to bring environmental programs and education to the surrounding neighborhood quickly be creating a semi-permanent nature center in an unused conference room in an existing community building. The initiative proved so successful that a permanent home for the nature center opened its doors to the community in 2021.

- Source: Summit Metro Parks: Activities (summitmetroparks.org)

G: iNaturalist – Nature exploration app (N/A)

- Apps like iNaturalist, developed jointly by the California Academy of Sciences and the National Geographic Society, helps citizen scientists learn more about the natural world around them, while simultaneously providing scientists with valuable crowd-sourced data on the environment.

- Source: iNaturalist.org: A Community for Naturalists · iNaturalist

H: Community Boat Share: Bartram's Garden (Philadelphia, PA)

- Bartram's Garden, a botanical garden and working farm along the Schuylkill River in Southwest Philadelphia, offers a community boatshare program that invites people of all ages to get out on the water with their free boatshare program.

- Source: Reimagining the Civic Commons: Principle 7: Connect people to nature and invite visitorship via walking, biking or transit - Reimagining the Civic Commons - Reimagining the Civic Commons

Chapter 5: Land Conservation and Management (Agriculture)

Introduction

Montgomery County has made a concerted effort to preserve land for agriculture and other uses. The 1964 General Plan "…on Wedges and Corridors" focused growth in defined corridors and maintained low-density residential uses, open space, and protected farmland in "wedges" in between. In 1980, M-NCPPC adopted the Functional Master Plan for the Preservation of Agriculture and Rural Open Space *in an effort to preserve* farmland and open space in the county. The Plan created a 110,000-acre Agricultural Reserve and a 26,000-acre Rural Open Space area that together cover almost a third of the county.

Since 1980, Montgomery County has protected 72,101 acres of farmland through easement programs and has acquired environmentally sensitive and culturally significant properties in the Agricultural Reserve, placing them into parkland. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council and the American Farmland Trust, these efforts have resulted in the most successful farmland and open space preservation program in the country. The county's diverse agricultural industry has 558 farms and 350 horticultural enterprises. These protected agricultural lands and park areas are key components of local and regional agricultural, economic, cultural, and environmental functions.

Thrive 2050, which was based on two years of outreach to various communities including farmers reaffirms the importance of maintaining agriculture as the primary land use in the Agricultural Reserve through policies, regulations, easements, and incentives, including tools designed to maintain a critical mass of contiguous farmland.

Land Management Activities

The state, county, and M-NCPPC operate a variety of land management and agricultural land preservation programs. They are briefly summarized below, and additional information is provided in Appendix 10.

State Programs

- The Maryland Environmental Trust (MET) encourages landowners to donate easements to protect scenic open areas.
- The Maryland Agriculture Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF) purchases agricultural land preservation easements directly from landowners for cash.
- The Rural Legacy Program (RLP) in Montgomery County encourages local governments and private land trusts to identify Rural Legacy areas and to competitively apply for funds to complement existing land conservation efforts or create new programs.

County Programs

- The Transferable Development Rights Program (TDR) allows landowners to transfer a development right from one parcel of land to another parcel. For agricultural land preservation, TDRs are used to shift development from agricultural areas to designated growth zones which are closer to public services. When rights are transferred away from a parcel, the land is restricted by a permanent TDR easement.
- The Montgomery County Agricultural Easement Program (AEP) allows the county to purchase agricultural preservation easements to preserve land for farming.
- The Montgomery County Building Lot Termination (BLT) Program reduces fragmentation of farmland due to residential development. A BLT easement restricts residential, commercial, industrial, and other non-agricultural uses beyond the limits imposed by a TDR easement.

M-NCPPC Programs

- The Legacy Open Space program acquires land for parks.
- The Agricultural Lease Program allows farmers to lease parkland. The Parks Department manages 23 agricultural leases covering 1,047 acres.

Inventory

Montgomery County has access to the programs listed above to preserve agricultural land. The county's Office of Agriculture is the lead agency implementing state and county easement programs to support agriculture in the county, while M-NCPPC implements the Legacy Open Space program and other policies/programs to support preservation and stewardship. The chart below provides a summary of protected acreage for each of the primary easement programs.

Program	Begun	Total through FY2021 (Acres)
Maryland Environmental Trust (MET)	1967	2291
Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Foundation (MALPF)	1977	5,001
Maryland Rural Legacy Program (RLP) in Montgomery County	1997	5,303
Montgomery County Transferable Development Rights Program (TDR)	1980	53,194
Montgomery County Agricultural Easement Program (AEP)	1987	8,940
Montgomery County Building Lot Termination Program (BLT) – Public	2008	1,257
Montgomery County Building Lot Termination Program (BLT) – Private	2008	645

Table 5.1. Source: Montgomery County Office of Agriculture

The Montgomery County Office of Agriculture keeps a comprehensive list of all existing preserved agricultural land in Montgomery County. It is shown in Appendix 11.
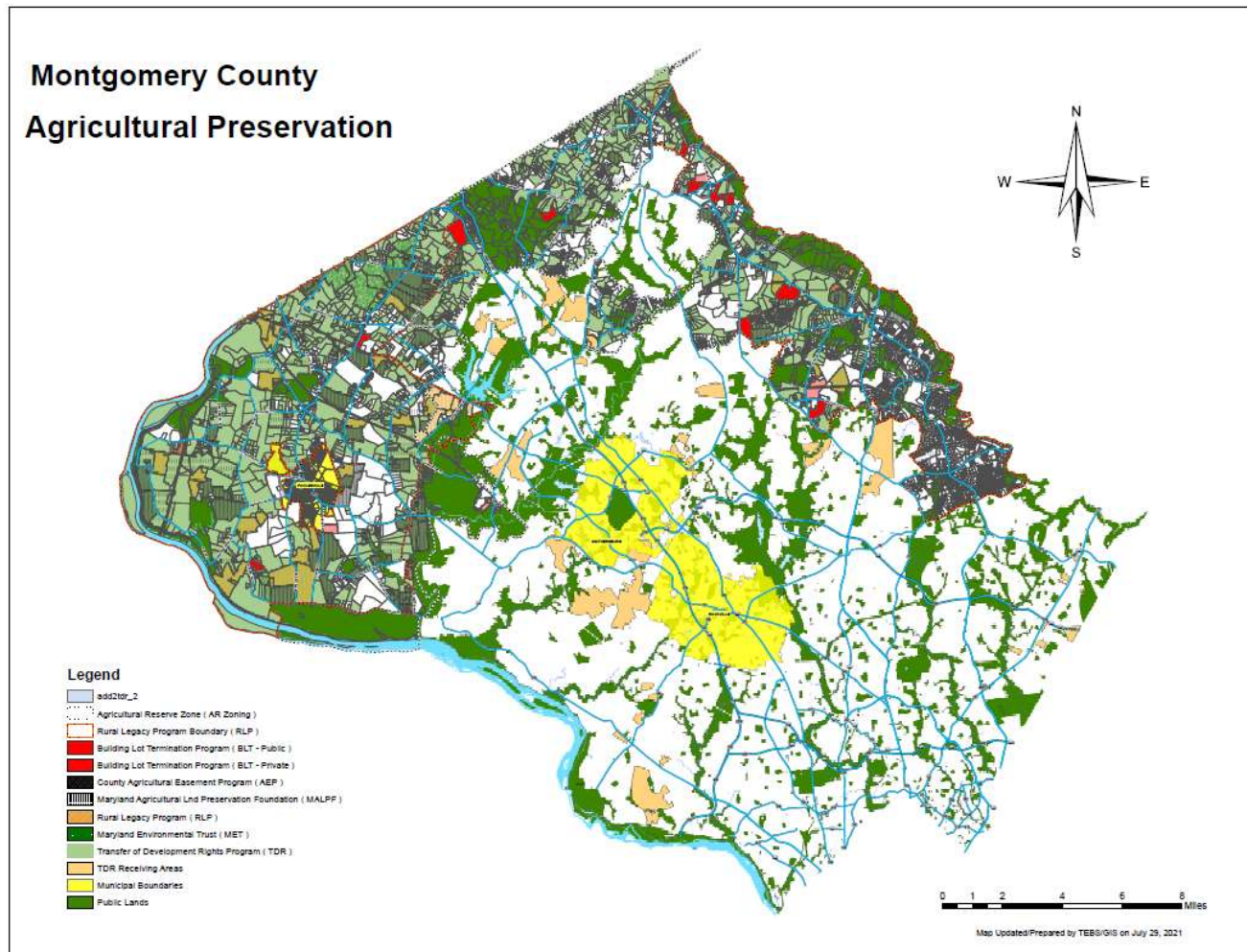

Figure 5.2: Managed and preserved land in Montgomery County includes 28,000 acres preserved in parkland conservation parks, regional parks, and stream valley parks; 76,631 acres of preserved farmland; and 21,297 acres in forest conservation easements. In the county, there are 84,000 acres of sensitive areas buffers (not included on this map) that restrict current and future development on steep slopes, sensitive soils, and wetlands, including 51,000 acres of stream buffer. Some of the acres listed are overlapping.

Assessment

The county has done an outstanding job of preserving agricultural and open space over the past six decades since the 1964 Wedges and Corridors Plan laid the groundwork for the county's land management and preservation.

The 1964 plan noted that land preservation is important to recreation, agriculture and conservation of natural resources, but it did not provide details on how the many people who live in the urban and

urbanizing areas of the county would be able to access and enjoy the benefits of preserving land for agriculture and other low- or no-development uses.

Therefore, the county could do a better job of promoting the preservation of land for recreation, agriculture and environmental management in ways that benefit the entire county. This includes ensuring convenient access to the Agricultural Reserve for people to visit, enjoy and develop an appreciation for the value of continued preservation of land for farming, recreation, and stewardship, as well as learn about the county's rural heritage, eat and drink locally produced food and beverages, and participate in outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, camping, and fishing.

Recommendations

1. Update policies and plans to acknowledge the evolution of the business of agriculture and develop recommendations to enhance the economic viability of farming, facilitate locally grown food, provide opportunities for outdoor recreation and tourism, and advance environmental quality.

2. Develop policies, regulations, easements, and incentives to maintain a critical mass of contiguous farmland to ensure the continued viability of farming and discourage sprawl.

3. Analyze and assess the Transfer of Development Rights and Building Lot Termination programs to evaluate their achievements and limitations in farmland preservation. Develop recommendations for the future of these programs to preserve contiguous farmland and maintain the economic viability of farming.

4. Explore alternative sources to fund agricultural easement programs, including new public funding mechanisms and tools to incentivize private sector purchase of easements. The Office of Agriculture and the Montgomery County Agricultural Preservation Advisory Board have continued to seek a sustainable source of funding for its preservation programs, with limited success.5. Implement the New Farmer Project to promote the creation of new sustainable-practice farm businesses using mentoring, business training, and an innovative approach to pairing farmers with landowners to speed the start-up process. The Office of Agriculture-OAG continues to partner with the University of MD-Extension on the Annual New/Beginning Farmer Course and Training. Topics include soils, crop planning, financing, equipment, permits and licenses, and pest management.

Chapter 6: Implementation

Introduction

The implementation of a comprehensive parks, recreation, and open space plan requires the participation of a variety of partners. This chapter identifies some of the key steps and implementors.

Montgomery Parks

Montgomery Parks has the lead role in implementing this plan since it owns almost all of the land where parks and recreational facilities are located in the county.

Capital Improvement Program

The biennial process of creating the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) aligns Parks Department spending with our goals and priorities. CIP projects for facility rehabilitation and facility development come from a variety of park master plans, functional master plans, area master plans, sector plans, and other plans and studies to address the priorities of Thrive 2050 and this PROS plan. New projects also result from public input during a biennial CIP Forum and online requests, Planning Board and County Council directives, and new parkland added through developer dedication and acquisition.

Proposed projects are evaluated for consistency with state and county goals for recreation, parks, and open space. Additional assessment criteria are used to help sort and prioritize proposed CIP projects. This PROS Plan recommends a continued emphasis on equity to prioritize projects that serve areas with large numbers of low-income residents and/or low levels of access to parks and recreation services relative to population. Project assessment criteria include:

- Promotes equity
- Renovates aging infrastructure
- Fulfills regulatory mandates
- Stewards natural or cultural resources
- Supports recommendations of plans or studies
- Responds to public requests
- Enhances safety
- Generates revenue or promotes economic development
- Minimizes operating costs and maintenance burdens

Projects are prioritized according to the Planning Board's adopted CIP strategy that is revised every two years during the CIP process. The most recently adopted strategy includes:

Immediacy and Efficiency – the project:

- Addresses public health, safety, and welfare
- Prevents degradation of existing facilities and avoids costly future repairs
- Preserves natural, cultural, or historic resources that are under threat
- Achieves compliance with code requirements and/or laws

- Needs to be timed with related projects by other agencies
- Increases revenue, achieves cost savings, and/or improves operational efficiency
- Leverages an opportunity, such as a partnership, donation, or grant
- Promotes multifunctional uses of new or renovated facilities for multi-age users

Equity and Need – the project:

- Promotes racial equity and social justice by improving park access, services, or facilities in Equity Focus Areas (EFAs)
- Provides facilities to an under-served geographic area or population group
- Implements recommendations of adopted plans (e.g. Thrive 2050, PROS, Energized Public Spaces Functional Master Plan, park master plans, area and sector plans, functional plans)

Project Priorities – the project:

- Renovates or expands both natural and hard surface trail systems
- Improves availability and quality of ballfields
- Activates and improves urban parks, focusing on densely populated areas with older infrastructure, limited open space and shortage of high-quality facilities

Project Delivery – increased focus on:

- Park Refreshers rather than large-scale park redevelopments
- Utilizing level-of-effort projects to maintain what we have and more quickly implement park
- Modifications to meet changing community needs
- Use of in-house staff resources and interdepartmental partnerships
- Simplified Facility Planning that allows flexibility to adapt to changing needs through project development

Upcoming Updates on CIP Strategy – Equity and Need filters

Montgomery Parks is currently working on updates to the strategy described above. The updates will align our CIP requests more closely with the ideas outlined in this PROS plan.

The new layers of analysis consider – areas where supply is insufficient to meet demand/needs by assessing Level of Service of selected facilities within the new proposed PROS Service Areas, parks within the Energized Public Spaces Plan Study Area (EPS Study Area) and Equity Improvement Areas (EIAs) – see Figure 6.1 and Appendix 5 for more information.
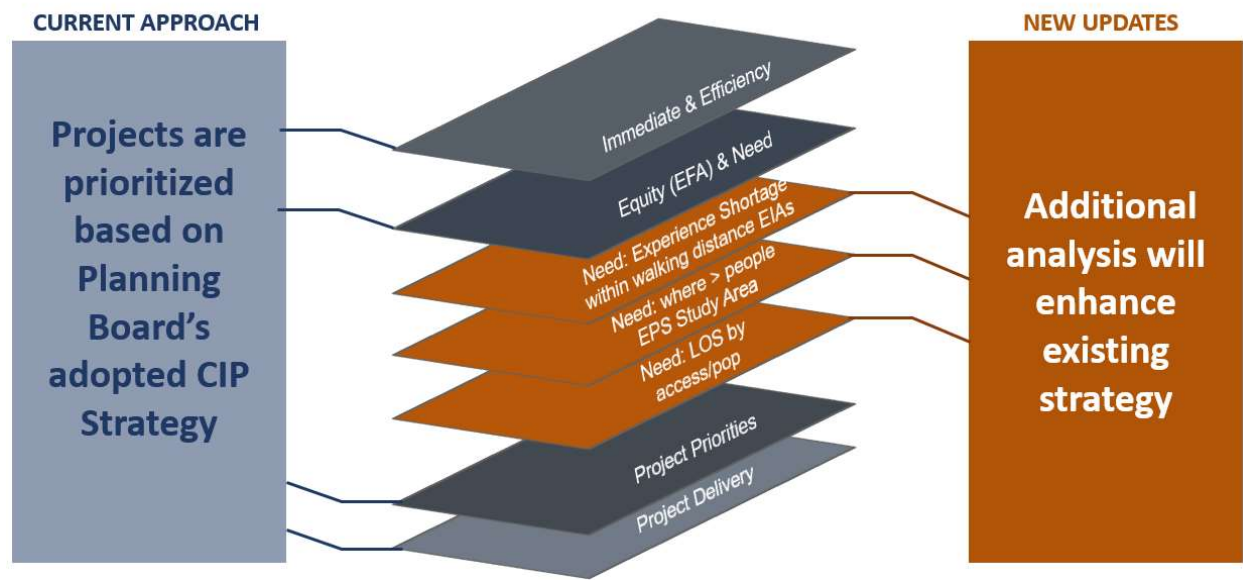
Figure 6.1 - Diagram illustrating filters used for CIP Prioritization and additional layers of analysis to be applied in upcoming CIP cycles.

Acquisition

The acquisition of additional parkland is often necessary to meet goals identified in PROS. Land acquisition should support the core purposes of parks identified in this plan:

- Encourage physical activity,
- Support social connections and civic engagement, and
- Steward natural and cultural resources.

Parks staff identify acquisition targets as necessary to advance these priorities. To advance the goals of Thrive 2050 and this PROS Plan, acquisitions will:

- Support park development in Equity Focus Areas,
- Target urban park needs and high-density areas,
- Provide opportunities for natural resource-based recreation,
- Improve connections to parks and trail networks, and
- Protect, restore, or enhance natural resources.

Land acquisition needs following these priorities are set forth in area master plans, sector plans, park master plans, the Legacy Open Space Functional Master Plan, and other park studies and plans. Current plans indicate 6,234 acres of land specifically targeted for park acquisition throughout the county. These sites are identified and tracked as "Proposed Parkland" in the Commission's Geographic Information System (GIS) database. Potential acquisition sites go through a similar selection and prioritization process as park development projects. When community proposals or unexpected opportunities for acquisition arise, they must be assessed against the criteria and priorities in this document.

Energizing Public Spaces (EPS)

The Energized Public Spaces Functional Master Plan (EPS Plan) provides a tool to measure how well Montgomery Parks provides facilities that support formal and informal social gathering (such as events, festivals, picnics, and people-watching), active recreation (trails, multi-use courts, spaces to play) and contemplative relaxation (gardens, urban forests) in the urban areas of the county. It does this by mapping and scoring areas of the County based on availability of facilities and amenities that support these kinds of activities and experiences within a walking distance.

Experience Improvement Areas (EIAs) - The EIA map shows areas where low experience scores are spatially clustered. Experience scores were determined by calculating the ratio and scoring of accessible public space experiences to the number of people capable of walking to them from a specific location.
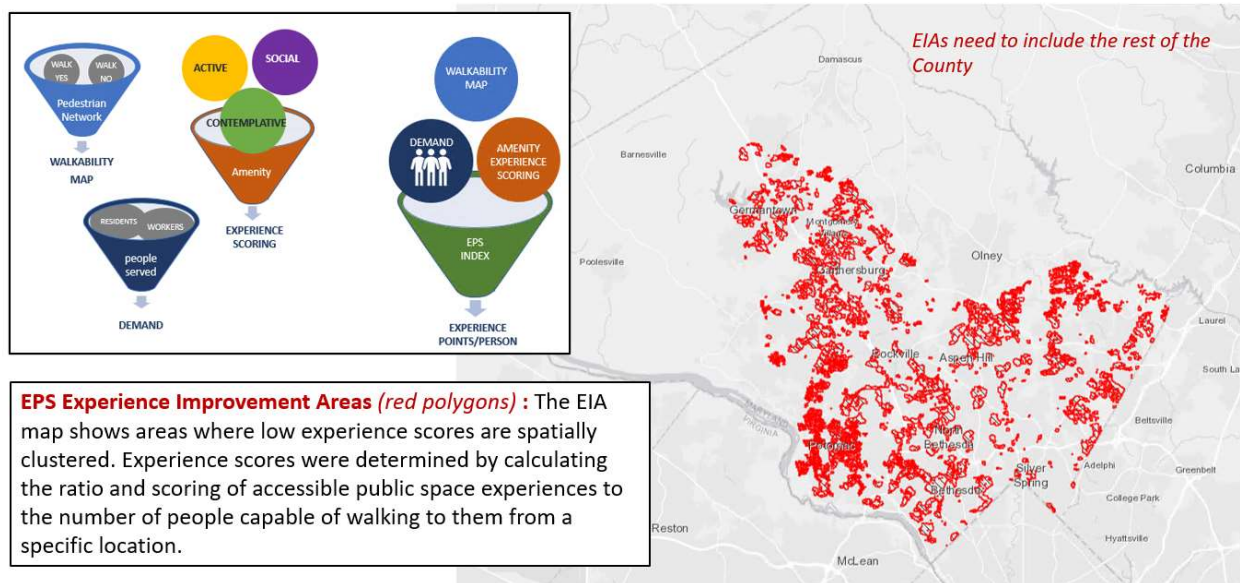

Figure 6.2 - EPS Plan Methodology Diagram and Experience Improvement Areas Map (locations that need prioritization)

In addition to this quantitative analysis of access to the full range of park activities and experiences, the Plan also applies a Hierarchy of Park Types and associated Design Guidelines. The Hierarchy of Park Types ensures a balance of urban park types across the geographic area covered by each urban sector plan. The Guidelines help Montgomery Parks and its existing and future partners deliver public spaces that are flexible and accommodate a variety of experiences within the network of public spaces.

By measuring the supply of amenities within walking distance of all urbanized or urbanizing areas and adding our Equity Focus Area (EFAs) to the analysis, the tool allows park planners to understand which communities are underserved by parks and to give elevated priority to underserved areas with higher concentrations of poverty, people of color, and residents with limited English proficiency.

Equity Focus Areas (EFAs)

Montgomery Parks uses Equity Focus Areas (EFAs) to help guide decisions about the allocation of resources in ways that prioritize the needs of marginalized people and communities. The Equity Focus

Areas analysis uses three variables – household income, race and ethnicity, and the ability to speak English– to identify areas of the county that may experience inequity in access to transportation, job opportunities and other resources supporting a high quality of life.
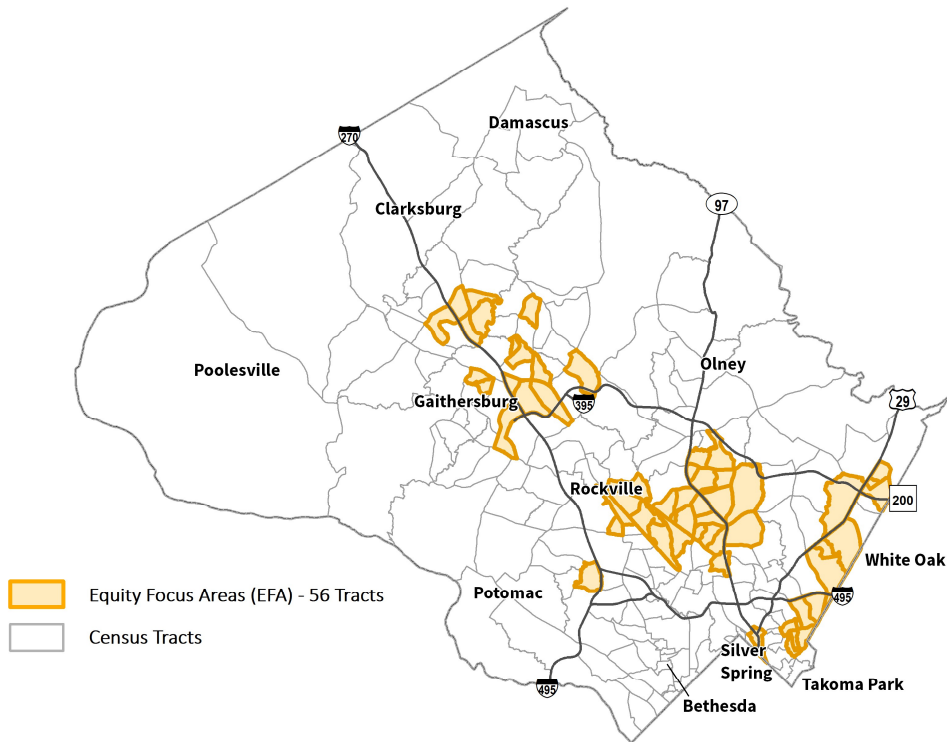

Figure 6.3: The Equity Focus Areas analysis identifies areas in the county with high concentrations of lower-income people of color who may also speak English less than well.

Level of Service (LOS)

Level of Service (LOS) standards are guidelines that define service areas based on populations that support investment decisions related to parks, facilities, and amenities. The PROS Level of Service analysis, which is in Appendix 5, helps Montgomery Parks identify gaps in service by establishing benchmarks and targets for the provisions of key amenities.

Setting Priorities: Research, Data Collection, and Public Engagement

Our priorities for park acquisition, development, and management are oriented around the objective of delivering the best possible system of park facilities and amenities to serve the needs of the people of Montgomery County. Understanding those needs requires the synthesis of information from a variety of sources, including research on local and national trends, data on park usage and other objective measures of demand, and input from residents and other stakeholders. .

Montgomery Parks uses a variety of tools and sources of information to inform priorities for the allocation of resources, with the specific methods applied in any particular case dependent on the scope and type of project. These methods often include a combination of the following:

- **Public Meetings.** In-person meetings with members of the public remain a useful tool for informing interested residents about upcoming projects and soliciting feedback. In recent years, online meetings have expanded the number and variety of people participating in the public engagement process. A fundamental weakness of both in-person and virtual meetings, however, is the tendency for this type of engagement to amplify the voices of the people with the strongest – but not necessarily the most representative – opinions. Public meetings also risk leaving out people who have an interest in a topic or project but have conflicting work or family commitments, lack access to transportation or a computer, or face other barriers to participation.

- **Staff knowledge and data collection.** The Parks Department gathers a wide variety of information about the use and condition of parks and facilities, and it has devoted resources to adding more sophisticated data collection capabilities such as trail counters, anonymized and

aggregated cell phone traffic measurement, and advanced park permit software. The Parks Department also has a longstanding commitment to rigorous scientific evaluation of natural resource protection and environmental performance, including, for example, the health of aquatic wildlife in streams and other measures of water quality. Together with the professional experience and knowledge of the staff involved in management and operations, this information is a valuable source of insight into the needs of the park system. See Appendix 5 for more detailed information about these tools.

- **Market research.** The sporting goods and outdoor recreation industries; non-profit organizations such as the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA); consulting firms and other companies, groups and government agencies often gather and publish information about national and regional trends in consumer preferences relevant to demand for park and recreation facilities and services. This kind of research may be an imperfect guide to local conditions and preferences, but it can help Montgomery Parks anticipate and assess emerging needs for new types of amenities, facilities, and programs.

- **Surveys.** Surveys can provide information on the attitudes and perceptions of a broad cross-section of residents while also providing insight on the views of specific subsets of the community. Large-scale survey research is not always a cost-effective or appropriate tool for soliciting in-depth input about a project, but even surveys with self-selected samples such as Open Townhall can gather useful information from a larger number of people than would be possible through public meetings. The extensive surveys (see appendix A) conducted for this PROS plan will guide planning and projects for the next several years and should be supplemented by additional surveys on specific projects and subjects.

- **Other forms of in-person and virtual engagement.** Parks staff sometimes set up tables in parks to administer surveys and engage in conversation with visitors participating in special events or during normal park activities. These kinds of information collection activities lower the barriers for community members to express their views to Parks staff and widen the range of people providing feedback. Similarly, some residents prefer to engage indirectly with government through groups organized around specific interests, which can be a trusted bridge to the government. Working with community partners allows Parks to reach a wider spectrum of residents than may attend traditional or online public meetings, complete surveys, or talk one-on-one with Parks staff.

- **Customer Service.** Parks receives valuable input from the community from the customer service phone number and email address. Park staff respond to complaints, requests, and compliments.

To meet the needs of a growing and diverse population, Montgomery Parks must efficiently use its available land and resources to deliver new programs, amenities, and infrastructure that serve residents across the county. While the Parks Department should carefully weigh neighborhood concerns regarding impacts from development of new facilities and programs in existing parks, this input should be considered in context with the priorities of the department and the interests of the county as whole. An engagement process that solicits and favors the views of a narrow segment of residents is inconsistent with Montgomery County's racial equity and social justice policy and with our obligation to give equal

consideration to people who lack the time or ability to actively participate in public outreach as to groups or individuals with the skills and resources to organize support for their preferred outcomes. Our public information and engagement processes must be thoughtfully designed to maximize opportunities for meaningful input while facilitating cost-effective and timely implementation of projects to meet the needs of all county residents.

Routine park repairs, small improvements or the addition of amenities that do not change the basic function of a park, and the like might require only notification on the department's website, while large-scale park renovations, major new facilities, or master plans could involve multiple avenues for public input depending on the scope and type of project. The Department's annual operating budget and the capital improvements program, which is prepared every two years, also offer opportunities for the public to weigh in on the department's spending and construction priorities. In many older neighborhoods, parkland is at a premium and residents should expect that new facilities like dog parks, athletic fields and courts, skate parks, and other parks infrastructure may replace existing amenities or be built in previously unprogrammed space, where feasible.

Programming

Programming occurs through the Parks Department's activation program, cultural and historic resources programs, such as museums and interpretation, and robust nature center programming. Programming should serve the purposes of parks described in this plan – encouraging physical activity, supporting social connections, and stewarding environmental resources. Programs serve these purposes in overlapping ways. Organized sports provide physical activity and bring people together. Nature programming connects people to nature and to one another. Interpretive trails educate people on the environment, culture, and history while exposing them to nature and providing places for groups of people to interact.

Precedents

The Innovation Initiative provides the outline of a process that enables Montgomery Parks to test new ideas, evaluate their effectiveness, and scale up if successful.

Innovation Initiative

1. Ideas competition for achieving defined outcomes
2. Help develop pilot programs or pop-up public spaces
3. Market prototypes so public can 'test-drive' them
4. Evaluate the success or shortcomings of the pilot
5. Refine, re-evaluate, and repeat as necessary
6. Scale up if successful

Iterative Placemaking Process