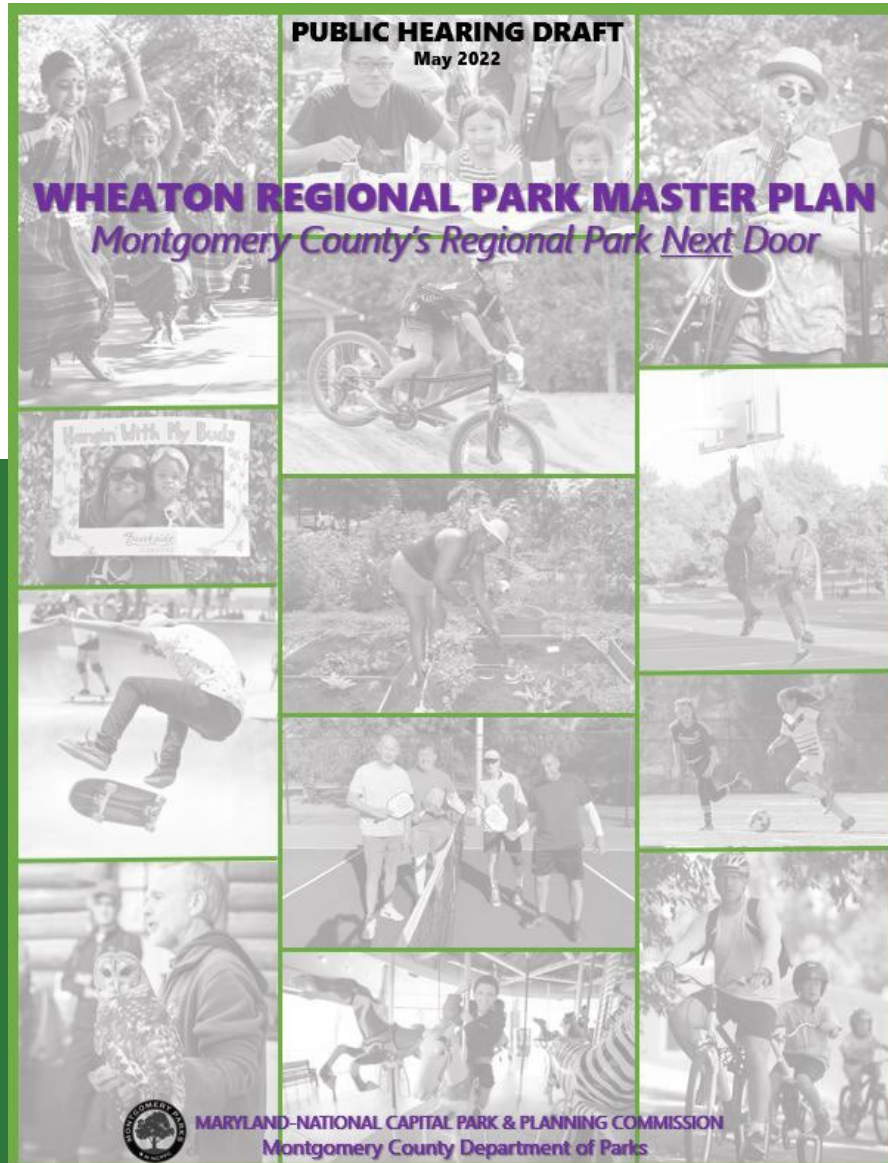


MONTGOMERY PARKS

Work Session #1 for 2022 Wheaton Regional Park Master Plan



On May 19, 2022, the Planning Board hosted a public hearing to receive testimony on the 2022 Wheaton Regional Park Master Plan. The public record remained open until May 27. During this work session, park planners will summarize the testimony and will be prepared to discuss several plan recommendations for which there were substantial comments.





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SUMMARY

- On May 19, the Planning Board received public testimony on the public hearing draft of the 2022 Wheaton Regional Park Master Plan. The public record remained open until 5 pm on May 27, 2022.
- During this work session, park planners will summarize the testimony for the Planning Board, and the Planning Board, Department of Parks leadership and park planners will discuss potential changes as necessary to the plan in response to comments received. Park planners will also respond to prior comments on the plan from the Board.
- On June 23, park planners intend to present the final draft plan to the Planning Board for approval, incorporating any changes requested by the Planning Board on June 9.

Summary of Public Testimony

Nineteen people testified either in-person or virtually at the public hearing. The public record remained open through 5 pm on May 27. More than 250 people submitted written comments to the Chair. A summary of all comments can be found in Appendix 1.

Major Themes:

(in order of # of comments received)

1. Tennis courts/Pickleball courts
2. Wheaton Park Stables & Equestrian Trails
3. Mountain biking on natural surface trails
4. Bird habitat/birding experience
5. Natural resources
6. Bicycle, pedestrian, and transit access
7. Noise and traffic impacts

Below is a more detailed summary of the comments received on these major themes, including staff analysis and recommended action (if any) for the Board's consideration.

1. Tennis Courts/Pickleball Courts

The draft plan recommends converting 3 of the 6 outdoor tennis courts in the Rubini Athletic Complex to 8-10 dedicated pickleball courts. This plan recommendation received the most comments. More than 90 percent of those comments expressed support for this recommendation, stressing that pickleball is the fastest growing sport in the U.S., Montgomery County is still playing catch-up to meet court demand, and the lack of pickleball courts in the eastern part of the county raises equity concerns. Many tennis players oppose the recommendation, expressing concerns about the loss of tennis courts in this part of the county they believe is already low on tennis courts.

Staff Analysis

There are approximately 20 outdoor public tennis courts (M-NCPPC + Montgomery County Public Schools) within 2-3 miles of the current outdoor courts at Wheaton Regional Park, and another 20 tennis courts within 5 miles. Many of these courts are located at middle and high schools where multiple courts are available. Additionally, there are nearly 900 public tennis courts in the county, and only 8 dedicated pickleball courts in M-NCPPC parks (Bauer Drive and Seven Locks). Pickleball players have strongly advocated for more dedicated, outdoor pickleball courts in the county, where they can have guaranteed play opportunities (as opposed to sharing tennis courts). Additionally, these courts have lights for nighttime play, and the courts are not within earshot of existing homes, avoiding potential noise complaints.

Staff recommendation: *Retain recommendation to convert 3 tennis courts to 8-10 pickleball courts.*

2. Wheaton Park Stables (WPS)

The draft plan recommends continued investment in the current buildings and infrastructure in the short-term to keep the visitors and employees safe and comfortable. The draft plan acknowledges that this facility offers valuable services and programming to the community. The plan also recommends new natural surface trails on this 27-acre part of the park; these trails would be open only to equestrians and hikers.

The plan recommends that Montgomery Parks assess the long-term use of the site. This land is relatively unconstrained environmentally and could present opportunities to deliver other needed facilities in this urbanizing area of the county.

WPS was one of the first facilities built in Wheaton Regional Park in the 1960s. It is popular not only for affordable horseback riding in this area of the county, but also offers less-tangible benefits as a scenic, rural relic of the county's agricultural past in an area of the county that has lost much of that legacy.

Most of the testimony expressed strong support to retain WPS in the long-term, stressing WPS is an important community landmark and focal point. Comments also stressed that WPS is one of only a handful of affordable stables in the county, and one of only a few in the DC area that offer trail-based programming for people with physical, emotional, and intellectual disabilities. Several comments asked that the plan more clearly define what is meant by "short term" and "longer term", and to also clarify the amount of investment needed to upgrade this facility so that it might become a more valued countywide destination, particularly one that meets or exceeds the needs of people with disabilities.

Staff Analysis

Montgomery Parks believes WPS is an important part of Wheaton Regional Park. Staff agrees it offers valuable programs and services. However, WPS operates as a private business on M-NCPPC property and is subject to a lease agreement. WPS is considered one of many public private partnerships in the Montgomery Parks system. The lease obligates WPS to carrying out certain responsibilities, but generally "all things equestrian" such as: upkeep of the riding ring/arena footing, individual horse stalls and bedding, feeding and veterinary care and program operations. Montgomery Parks' Facilities Management Division (FMD) is responsible for maintaining the building and building envelope and systems infrastructure including electrical, plumbing, and HVAC. The cost for FMD to provide maintenance and repair is offset by revenues from the rental payments from WPS which are deposited into the Property Management fund as part of the Montgomery Parks operating budget. Currently, the lease operates on a month-to-month basis.

The WPS facilities and infrastructure have received regular maintenance and repair over the years however the age of the facility (1960s) means that it will eventually require significant investment, and underlying construction plans and permits, to modernize the facility to meet today's guidelines.

The exact cost is currently unknown, but FMD estimates it could be a multi-million-dollar endeavor. Because the current situation is agreeable to both WPS and M-NCPCC, the master plan does not make long-term commitments about this facility and seeks to keep options on the table about the future potential uses of this land. M-NCPCC has no current plans to convert the land to a different use. Staff agrees the master plan should clarify what is meant by “short term” and longer-term” to offer some assurances to the community about the timing of any potential changes to this area of the park.

Staff recommendation: *Retain plan recommendations but add language to clarify what is meant by “short-term” and “longer-term” and describe and explain the above analysis.*

3. Mountain Biking

The draft plan recommends converting some limited-use natural surface trails to multi-use trails to allow mountain biking. This move is consistent with a policy in the 2016 Countywide Park Trails Plan (CPTP) that requires all natural surface park trails be multi-use, and that limited-use trails be appropriately justified to restrict certain users. Wheaton Regional Park was primarily developed prior to the existence of mountain biking as an activity. Current policy, until this plan amendment, restricted mountain bikers from using natural surface trails in the park.

Public testimony was split between those who support mountain biking in the park, and those who express concerns that trails that allow both horses and bicycles present a safety hazard. Particularly, equestrians believe the Wheaton Loop Trail should remain restricted to mountain biking because it is important to the operations of WPS, and that mountain biking will diminish the quality of its trail-based programming. Mountain bike supporters, on the other hand, believe specified existing trails should be open to mountain biking, to allow mountain biking in the park and to enable mountain bikers to effectively and safely travel from the Northwest Branch Trail to destinations in Wheaton Regional Park and beyond.

Staff Analysis

The natural surface trails in the park have been limited to hiking and equestrian in-part because up until the last decade or so there had been limited demand for mountain biking in this area of the county. Mountain biking, however, is among the fastest growing sports in the U.S., and while Montgomery Parks has been renovating trails to accommodate mountain biking throughout the county, Wheaton Regional Park remains a place where mountain bikers have not been allowed.

Staff recommendation: *Retain current plan recommendations to allow mountain biking on certain natural surface trails to make them fully multi-use consistent with the 2016 CPTP, and keep some trails limited use.*

4. Bird Habitat and Birding Experience

The draft master plan recognizes that the park's forests are important to resident and migrating birds and recommends protecting the birding experience by offering hiking-only trails that can offer quieter and less noise intrusion.

Public comments and testimony, however, highlighted the importance of other park areas to birding enthusiasts, particularly the gravel parking lot in the Shorefield Area, Pine Lake and nearby woods, and the gravel road/path between these areas. Comments expressed concerns about the impact of new development on bird habitat and the experience of birders. Birders are concerned about any plan recommendation that may cause loss of trees and/or may introduce more park users in areas of the park that currently offer quiet(er) experiences.

Staff Analysis

Park planners were invited to join birders to walk their areas of concern during an outing on Friday, May 13. Staff listened to their concerns, as well as their ideas and suggestions. Staff believes the plan recommendations can be implemented in a manner that can address the concerns of birders. Additionally, several of their ideas and suggestions can be incorporated into the plan.

Staff recommendation: Retain plan recommendations for the affected areas but add language that recognizes the important of birding in these areas and the measures that should be taken to minimize impact to bird habitat and the birding experience during plan implementation. Additionally, new recommendations for meadows will be added to the plan, intended to enhance bird habitat, and improve the birding experience in park areas where meadows can be created and/or augmented.

5. Natural Resources

The draft plan acknowledges the importance and sensitivity of the park's forests and natural resources, and the benefits they provide not only to ecosystems and wildlife habitat but also for natural resource-based recreation. The large swaths of forests offer shade, shelter for wildlife, clean air and water, and an escape from urban crowds and noise. These qualities make this park unique and special to many residents and park users.

Public testimony focused on not overdeveloping the park. People expressed concern about introducing more imperviousness, and thus adding more sediment and polluted runoff to streams. Where new development is proposed, people asked that green infrastructure and sustainable stormwater management strategies be employed to mitigate impacts caused by increased imperviousness. People also are concerned about potential noise and lighting impacts to wildlife. There are concerns about forest fragmentation. And related, several people were concerned that Montgomery Parks is not doing enough to control/manage non-native invasive plants in the park.

Staff analysis

Staff is aware of the park's valuable and sensitive natural and aquatic resources. The plan highlights that much of the forested area is a designated Biodiversity Area, managed to preserve its important natural resources, species diversity and wildlife habitat. Many of the plan's recommendations are designed and intended to restore streams and ecosystem functions as well as protect forests, trees, and wildlife habitat. Staff is also aware of the potential harmful impacts of inappropriate lighting (i.e., too bright, directed towards forests).

Staff recommendation: *Retain current plan recommendations. Modify language in the park stewardship section of the plan to recommend doing more to consistently manage/control non-native plants in the park, particularly in areas that are disturbed by park and resource improvements and/or new facilities. Add language that recommends all new lighting, as well as modified lighting, meet standards and guidelines of the International Dark Sky Association.*

6. Bicycle, Pedestrian and Transit Access

The draft plan includes numerous recommendations to improve safe access to the park by people traveling by bicycle, on-foot, and by bus. The plan recommends new sidewalks, bikeways or pathways, crosswalks and intersection improvements, wayfinding signs, and bike racks. The plan also recommends improvements to park entrances for which people primarily arrive by walking or biking.

Several people commented in support of the plan recommendations to make it easier and safer for people to travel to the park by means other than driving. Several people also commented on the lack of recommendations to improve transit access to the park.

Staff analysis

Staff fully supports park access improvement. During public outreach and community engagement, staff repeatedly heard comments about improving transit access to the park. Staff met with representatives from Transit Services in Montgomery County Department of Transportation in 2021 to discuss ways to improve bus access to the park. Weekend service for Ride-On Route 31 was discussed, as well as expanding the Ride-On Flex service area in Glenmont/Wheaton to include the entire park. MCDOT recommended we identify potential transit access improvements to the park as part of its Reimagine Ride-On Study.

Staff recommendation: *Include a language in the plan about improving transit access to the park.*

7. Noise and Traffic Impacts

While staff discussed potential neighborhood impacts of new or modified facilities near homes, the plan does not specifically include any recommendations to mitigate potential traffic or noise impacts. Approximately 20 existing homes along Arcola Avenue and Orebaugh Avenue are located within less than 300' of proposed new park facilities or re-purposed facilities.

Several of these homeowners submitted comments on the plan. While they are not necessarily opposed to the new or re-purposed facilities, they are concerned about potential noise and traffic impacts and asked that these impacts be mitigated as much as possible.

Staff analysis

Staff agrees the plan should recognize that homeowners who live proximate to the park (less than 300') could be potentially negatively impacted by increased noise and/or traffic. The plan should discuss this topic as part of the recommendations for the Rubini Athletic Complex.

Staff recommendation: Add language to the plan to acknowledge potential noise and/or traffic impacts to homes along and/or nearby to the Orebaugh Avenue entrance caused by improvements and new facilities in the Rubini Athletic Complex.