

ATHLETIC FIELD USE PERMIT POLICY UPDATE



Description

Review and approve the proposed 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*. This policy is an update to the current 2013 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy* to improve equity and access to permitted athletic fields for county residents.

COMPLETED: 1/20/26

PLANNING BOARD HEARING DATE: 2/5/26

MCPB ITEM NO. 5

CW	Carl Weber, Athletic Field Planner, Implementation Planning Section Carl.Weber@montgomeryparks.org , 301.495.2526
MAF	Matthew Folden, Supervisor, Implementation Planning Section matthew.folden@montgomeryparks.org , 301.495.2527
CC	Christie Ciabotti, Chief, Park Planning & Stewardship Division christie.ciabotti@montgomeryparks.org , 301.650.4365
DF	Darren Flusche, Deputy Director, Parks Department Darren.Flusche@montgomeryparks.org , 301.495.2475

SUMMARY

- Staff requests that the Planning Board review and approve the proposed 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*.
- The revised policy is intended to improve community equity and access to permitted athletic fields; address challenges faced by user groups; and expand field capacity by limiting field permitting that is not actually used by the permit holder (also referred to as Ghost Permitting).
- The athletic field system offers a total of 312 athletic fields available for permitting throughout the county, providing diverse options to accommodate various sports and activities.
- The idea for an update to the 2013 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy* was first introduced to user groups in February 2024. Staff conducted two separate user group surveys over the course of this policy revision and held numerous meetings with user groups and the Montgomery County Sports Advisory Committee. Additional details on public outreach are included in this staff report.
- The Sports Advisory Committee provided a letter of support for the draft 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*.

BACKGROUND

The Athletic Field Use Permit Policy serves as the primary framework for managing and permitting Montgomery Parks' athletic fields. This Policy was last updated by the Planning Board on February 21, 2013, and outlines eligibility for field use, the types and classifications of fields available for reservation, permitted field use timeframes, and the process for securing a field use permit. In addition, the 2013 Policy details important operational aspects such as criteria for field closures, seasonal field and permit availability, and other important dates throughout the year.



Figure 1: Cricket at South Germantown Recreational Park

RATIONALE FOR THE 2026 ATHLETIC FIELD USE PERMIT POLICY

Since the current 2013 Policy was adopted, organized sports and the agencies responsible for athletic field permitting (including Montgomery Parks), have evolved significantly. Montgomery Parks staff recognize an opportunity to update the Athletic Field Use Permit Policy to improve the availability of public athletic fields and to deliver more equitable and enhanced services to the community. Over the years, Parks staff have received consistent feedback highlighting areas where improvements to the Policy are needed, including the challenges users face when navigating the permitting process, the problem of permitted athletic fields not being utilized during their permitted hours (also referred to as Ghost Permitting), and the confusion stemming from inconsistencies between Montgomery Parks and Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF) permitting systems. In response, Montgomery Parks engaged user groups, reviewed existing policy details, and developed recommendations to make the

permit process clearer, more equitable and accessible, and more responsive to the needs of field users.

ABOUT MONTGOMERY PARKS ATHLETIC FIELDS

Montgomery Parks offers a total of 312 athletic fields available for permitting, providing diverse options to accommodate various sports and activities. The field inventory includes:

- 154 rectangle fields suitable for sports like soccer and football,
- 8 cricket fields,
- 24 baseball fields, and
- 120 softball fields.

Each of these fields is also designated into one of three field classifications: Practice/Game Fields, Game Only Fields, and Year-Round Synthetic Turf Fields, as described below.

Practice/ Game Fields

The majority of athletic fields in Montgomery Parks, 251 fields, are designated as “Practice/Game fields” (formerly known as Local Park fields). These facilities are predominantly situated in local parks and are maintained to an economical standard that is ideal for both practices and games.



Figure 2: Practice/ Game Field at Layhill Local Park

Game Only Fields

For higher-level competition, there are 44 fields designated as “Game Only fields” (formerly known as Regional/Recreational Park fields). These facilities are primarily located in regional or recreational parks and are maintained at a premium standard that is ideal for games.



Figure 3: Game Only Field at Wheaton Regional Park

Year-Round Synthetic Turf Fields

To support year-round play regardless of weather conditions, there are four (4) “Year-Round Synthetic Turf Fields” (formerly known as Synthetic Turf fields). These facilities are typically located in strategic locations and ensure continuous high quality field access for athletes and leagues.



Figure 4: Year-Round Synthetic Turf Field at Martin Luther King, Jr. Recreational Park

UPDATED ATHLETIC FIELD USE PERMIT POLICY

MAJOR REVISIONS TO POLICY ELEMENTS

As previously discussed, the Policy was last updated in 2013. This current update implements several significant changes to the existing 2013 Policy to better serve Parks' users.

For context, when it was last adopted by the Planning Board, the 2013 Policy introduced several significant changes from prior policies. These changes included moving to bulk permitting for leagues, which required all teams (and individuals within a league) to submit a single consolidated request for permits, as well as setting conditions for the use of synthetic turf fields. The 2013 update also did away with the two-week August closure for Practice/Game fields (formerly known as Local Park fields), clarified how non-designated¹ sports may be permitted, how use impacts historic use status, and refined the application procedures for greater transparency and consistency.

Specific revisions to the 2013 Policy are discussed, below:

Field Naming and Classification

One notable revision to the existing 2013 Policy is the overhaul of the field naming and classification system. Previously, fields were categorized based on the type of park in which they were located (i.e. either a Regional/Recreation Park or a Local Park). This approach established distinct standards: Regional/Recreation Park fields were maintained to a higher standard and intended primarily for games, while Local Park fields were more numerous, maintained more economically, and generally used for practices as well as games.

This rigid classification system, however, proved inadequate as field use dynamics changed and exceptions to the standard classification became necessary. For instance, Blair Local Park features fields that are maintained at the higher Regional/Recreation standard despite being situated in a local park. In addition, Montgomery Parks has four existing synthetic turf fields, which required a separate permitting category.

Recognizing these inconsistencies and the need for a more user-friendly classification system, Montgomery Parks transitioned away from the previous park-based classifications. The new classification system aligns field categories with their intended use and maintenance level, making it easier for users to understand and select appropriate fields regardless of the park in which the fields are located. Under this updated classification system:

- Fields formerly considered Local Park fields are now called Practice/Game Fields.
- Fields previously classified as Regional/Recreation fields are now designated as Game Only Fields.
- Synthetic turf fields have been reclassified as Year-Round Synthetic Turf Fields.

¹ A non-designated sport is one that utilizes an overlay field that is specifically designated for another sport during a playing season (i.e. a rectangular field designated for football in the fall being permitted for a spring sport, such as softball, during the fall season.)

This updated classification system better reflects actual field use and maintenance practices, providing greater clarity and flexibility for all users.

Permitting Order of Consideration

The second major change to the current 2013 Policy involves changing the former Criteria section, which outlined the order in which field permits are allocated to users, into the new Permitting Order of Consideration. Previously, the Criteria section was split into two phases, which often led to confusion about how items within each phase were prioritized and sequenced. The updated Permitting Order of Consideration now provides a straightforward, four-step process that clearly outlines the order in which permits are issued. This revision eliminates ambiguity and ensures transparency, making it easier for all users to understand how permit decisions are made. Additionally, the new approach is fully aligned with current operational practices, promoting consistency across the permitting process.

Priority Use

To improve the public availability of athletic field facilities and deliver a more equitable field permitting system, the updated 2026 Policy introduces a significant change to Priority Use. Previously, organizations could reserve a field for up to seven days a week under Priority Use. The new 2026 Policy reduces this allotment to a maximum of four days per week per field—specifically, three weekdays and one weekend day for each organization. This updated 2026 Policy also brings Montgomery Parks into closer alignment with Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF), the county's other principal permitting organization.

This adjustment to Priority Use is designed to ensure that Montgomery Parks athletic fields are treated as a public resource, available to multiple groups without being monopolized by any single organization. By limiting Priority Use, Parks opens more opportunities for diverse community groups to access Montgomery Parks fields, supporting the goal of equitable field distribution.

While the guaranteed Priority Use days have been reduced, organizations can still request additional field time during the open Go-Live event (see below). During this event, all remaining field availability is released online, giving all users (including organizations with Priority Use status) a chance to reserve fields beyond their Priority Use allotment.

Montgomery Parks recognizes the value that Priority Use offers to field users and believes this benefit should be reserved for leagues that serve county residents. Toward this end, the updated 2026 Policy requires that leagues seeking Priority Use status be comprised of at least two-thirds county residents. Initially, Montgomery Parks planned to require organizations to submit annual roster data to verify eligibility. During the draft survey, however, many user groups—and the Sports Advisory Committee (SAC)—expressed concerns about privacy related to sharing detailed roster information.

In response to this feedback, Montgomery Parks revised the requirement. Organizations are now asked to submit general team data instead of full annual rosters, with the understanding that Montgomery Parks may request roster details if necessary. This approach strikes a balance between respecting user privacy and ensuring that Priority Use primarily benefits county residents, aligning with the Department's commitment to equitable and responsible field allocation.

Overall, this updated 2026 Policy seeks to balance the needs of long-standing user groups with the Department's obligation to providing broad access to public amenities for the entire community.

Go-Live Event

Since the 2013 update, the county enhanced its online permitting process by transitioning to *ActiveMontgomery*, a more user-friendly online platform. This upgrade required a revision of procedures to ensure smoother and more transparent field reservations. One key improvement is the introduction of a dedicated *Go-Live* event for each season. During this event, all available field times are released on the Parks website, allowing users to easily view and directly reserve Practice/Game fields, as well as check the current availability of Game Only and the Year-Round Synthetic Turf fields. The new 2026 Policy now includes a comprehensive section detailing the purpose, step-by-step procedures, and approximate dates of the *Go-Live* event. This change provides greater clarity, accessibility, and flexibility for all users seeking to reserve athletic fields.

Field Closure

The 2026 Policy includes an updated Field Closure section to provide greater clarity and transparency. The revised Field Closure section now provides expanded details on seasonal closures, outlining when fields will be unavailable throughout the year due to seasonal considerations. These enhancements make the permitting process more predictable and user-friendly by ensuring that users have a clear understanding of field closures and the factors that influence these decisions.

Conditions of Use

Historically, Montgomery Parks athletic fields operate under the guidance of three key documents: the *M-NCPCC Rules and Regulations*, which provides overarching governance of Montgomery Parks, the Athletic Field Use Permit Policy (the subject of this policy revision), and the *Athletic Field Conditions of Use*.

This final document, the *Athletic Field Conditions of Use*, details the specific rules and expectations for field usage and is related in many ways to the *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*. To improve clarity and make these two documents more user friendly, the *Athletic Field Conditions of Use* has been merged with the new 2026 Policy and is included as an appendix to the revised 2026 Policy. Changes to the *Athletic Field Conditions of Use* are as follows:

Athletic Field Conditions of Use: Ghost Permitting

A new section has been added that explicitly prohibits "Ghost Permitting"—the act of reserving field time without using the field at the permit time. Ghost Permitting significantly decreases the availability of fields for legitimate use, thereby limiting recreational opportunities for the entire community. Users are encouraged to report any suspected Ghost Permitting directly to Montgomery Parks. Another important addition is a clause forbidding the subletting of Montgomery Parks athletic fields, ensuring that only permitted groups use the facilities as intended. If a group no longer needs a field, they must promptly return the reservation to Montgomery Parks so it can be made available for re-permitting through the official process. These improvements collectively ensure fair use, transparency, and better support for all field users.

Athletic Field Conditions of Use: Report a Concern

The Report a Concern section has been revised to clearly direct users' reports based on the type of issue and time of day, making it easier for users to communicate issues to Parks staff promptly and effectively.

Athletic Field Conditions of Use: Permit Cancellation/ Change Fees

The most significant change to the Conditions of Use involves fees associated with changing or canceling field reservation permits. Previously, the 2013 *Policy* required a flat \$50 administrative fee for each field reservation permits change or cancellation. This structure often discouraged users from returning small increments of unneeded permit time, as the fee could exceed the value of the unneeded hours being returned. Conversely, groups were more inclined to reserve and later return larger blocks of time, facing minimal financial consequences. As a result, some organizations released substantial amounts of field time at the last minute, making it difficult or impossible for other potential users to seek permits for field reservations and utilize those hours effectively. From a financial perspective, Montgomery Parks lost revenue associated with the returned field time that made it difficult for Parks staff to recapture field maintenance expenses that would have otherwise been covered by permit fees.

To address issues associated with permit cancellation/ change fee, the revised 2026 Policy increases the fee from \$50 to 25% of the permit cost. This new approach encourages permit holders to return any unused time by making the fee proportionate to the value of the returned hours. At the same time, it discourages over-permitting and last-minute cancellations, ensuring that field time is allocated more efficiently and is accessible to a broader range of community groups. Ultimately, this updated fee structure strikes a balance between incentivizing timely returns and promoting responsible permitting practices.

Athletic Field Conditions of Use: Pilot Programs

Montgomery Parks added a new section allowing for the flexibility of future Pilot Programs to evaluate potential changes to policies established in the 2026 *Policy*. The Pilot Program section clarifies that Montgomery Parks may occasionally conduct Pilot Programs that could temporarily diverge from existing policies set forth in the 2026 *Policy* document. By allowing for controlled, small-scale trials, Montgomery Parks can thoughtfully assess the impact of proposed changes—considering both benefits and potential drawbacks—before deciding on broader implementation. This flexible approach enables informed decision-making and helps ensure that any future policy adjustments are based on practical, real-world experience.

RETAINED POLICY ELEMENTS

Throughout this process, Parks staff received numerous requests to change elements of the current 2013 *Policy* from users and stakeholders. Although each request was considered, staff did not ultimately incorporate all requests into the revised 2026 *Policy*.

Practice Use of Game Only Fields

One of the most frequent requests reflected users' desire to allow team practices to occur on higher-level Game Only fields. These fields are specifically designated for games as a strategy to maintain their premium playing conditions for competitive events. Permitting additional practices on these

fields would lead to increased wear and tear and diminish the overall quality of the facility. The potential for overuse would undermine the purpose of having dedicated Game Only fields. As a result, the use of Game Only fields is recommended to continue without revision.

Although Parks staff did not accommodate users' requests to permit team practices on Game Only fields, staff recognize the importance of listening to user requests and exploring potential improvements to improve the user experience. Toward that end, the Department is launching a pilot program, over the next year, to evaluate allowing practices on Game Only Fields at two diamond fields at Damascus Recreational Park. For the purposes of this pilot, one field is a baseball diamond and the other is a softball diamond. This is the first step in understanding the repercussions of this potential change.

Holiday Use of Game Only Fields

Another frequent user request was to allow access to Game Only fields during holidays; however, this request cannot be accommodated due to operational and staffing constraints. Game Only fields require specialized preparation and maintenance before they can be used. Opening these fields during holidays would necessitate scheduling staff to work those days, which would increase labor costs beyond current funding levels and could present challenges with union contract agreements. Parks staff understand the desire for expanded field access and will continue to review opportunities to improve field access as resources and operational considerations allow.

Special Events and Tournaments

Montgomery Parks received numerous requests from the community to ensure that special events and tournaments do not displace groups with existing field permits. Currently, the scheduling process considers both Priority Use status and special events/ tournaments simultaneously, which has, at times, resulted in tournaments being approved that displace previously permitted Priority Use times for community organizations. Recognizing the importance of fairness, transparency, and equitable access, Montgomery Parks acknowledges that the current policy needs to be re-evaluated. To address these concerns, Montgomery Parks staff is temporarily pausing the approval of any new special events/ tournaments that would displace groups holding Priority Use permits. This measure will remain in effect while the *Special Event and Tournament Policy* is reviewed to ensure future practices better support community needs and uphold equitable field access for all users.

Extended Season

The final major recurring user request centered on extending the current permitting dates for Game Only and Practice/Game fields. Many users asked to start their field permits earlier in the spring and continue play on the fields beyond November 30th each year. Although Montgomery Parks appreciates the enthusiasm for expanded recreational opportunities, the local climate presents significant challenges for turf grass and field maintenance.

During the months of December, January, February, and much of March, low soil evaporation rates cause the ground to retain excess moisture from precipitation. These saturated conditions leave fields highly susceptible to damage from any activity, risking long-term harm to field quality. Extending the season into these months would likely result in frequent rainouts and minimal additional play, while posing substantial risks to the overall durability and playability of fields. For these reasons, the

established limits to seasonal play remain necessary to protect field conditions and ensure safe, high-quality experiences for all users.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Montgomery Parks deeply values the diverse user groups that enrich the community by providing a wide range of athletic opportunities. To ensure these groups played an active role in shaping the Athletic Field Use Permit Policy, Parks staff implemented a comprehensive, three-phase community engagement strategy. The first phase involved distributing an initial survey to gather broad feedback and gauge user groups' overall perceptions of the 2013 *Policy* (Attachment C). In the second phase, staff collaborated with an outreach consultant, Brick and Story, to conduct targeted outreach and focus group work that resulted in an in-depth exploration of key issues and themes identified in the survey responses (Attachment D). The third and final phase invited user groups and stakeholders to review and comment on the draft 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy* (Attachment C).

Parks staff engaged in collaborative discussions with a variety of stakeholders regarding the 2026 *Policy* to ensure that users' voices were heard, and their perspectives were incorporated throughout the policy update process. These interactions included scheduled one-on-one meetings, phone consultations with Parks' Permit Office staff, and regular sessions with representatives from other Montgomery County agencies and committees. Notably, Parks staff maintained a close working relationship with the Department of Recreation staff, Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF), and the Sports Advisory Committee (SAC)².

The SAC, facilitated by Montgomery County Department of Recreation staff, is composed of 23 members, including 17 voting members appointed by the County Executive and confirmed by the County Council, and at least 6 non-voting ex-officio members representing county agencies. The selection of voting members intentionally reflects a broad range of community backgrounds and expertise, ensuring the committee is well-equipped to fulfill its mission: "researching and reporting on factors that impact participation and diversity in sports across Montgomery County" and "identifying disparities in youth sports and providing recommendations to the County Executive and County Council on how to address them." From the outset, the SAC demonstrated strong interest in the 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*. Parks staff delivered several presentations to the SAC about both the existing policy and the intended policy update. SAC members were actively invited to participate in surveys and encouraged to nominate individuals for focus groups, ensuring broad and inclusive community input in the policy update process. Throughout the process, the Committee offered valuable insights and recommendations that have meaningfully informed policy development. In recognition of their partnership with Parks staff on this update, the SAC formally submitted a letter of support for the new policy (Attachment E).

Parks staff collaborated with the Montgomery County Department of Recreation to strengthen the relationship between the two agencies. Unlike most jurisdictions, parks and recreation facilities

² The Sports Advisory Committee (SAC) was established by the County Council, through Bill No. 6-22, in June 2022. The primary role of the SAC is to advise the Council and County Executive on matters affecting access to fields and sports and make recommendations to improve the quality, quantity, and variety of sports opportunities and facilities in the county. Montgomery Parks staff serve on the SAC in an *ex-officio* capacity as representatives of the Planning Board.

operate under separate agencies, which underscores the importance of clear communication and alignment between agencies. In a dedicated session, Montgomery Parks met with Department of Recreation to thoroughly review the draft 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy* and explore its potential impacts on Department of Recreation operations. Through these discussions, both agencies have established a foundation for ongoing cooperation and shared understanding. Parks staff remain committed to deepening this partnership throughout the policy development process and beyond, ensuring that both organizations work together to enhance recreational opportunities for the entire community.

The Montgomery County Department of Recreation did supply Montgomery Parks with a letter (Attachment F) for the Planning Board to review particular components of the Athletic Field Use Permit Policy. These components are as follows County government Priority and Partnership, Alignment with Recreation Program Timelines, Rosters, Privacy, and Data Sharing, Cancellations, Change Requests, and Fees, Pilot Programs and Alternative Use, and Conditions of Use and Enforcement. Montgomery Parks has considered these requests but believe our policy address their concerns to the best of Montgomery Parks abilities while created the most accessible field system in the county.

Parks staff met with Bethesda Chevy Chase Baseball Inc. (BCC) at their request to discuss several proposed changes in the draft 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*. During the meeting, BCC expressed concerns about the reduction of Priority Use from seven days per week to four days (three weekdays and one weekend day). The organization emphasized that the current Priority Use Policy provides stability to their operations, enabling them to offer recreational opportunities to thousands of local children. BCC noted that decreasing Priority Use could jeopardize their ability to secure sufficient field time, potentially forcing them to reduce the number of teams and limit registrations, thereby diminishing their service to the community.

In response to these concerns, Parks staff explained the importance of modifying Priority Use to improve access to community groups who do not qualify for preferential reservations. Staff further explained that any additional field reservation time beyond the proposed four days of Priority Use could potentially be acquired through the Go-Live process, where all user groups have an equal opportunity to permit available fields. While recognizing that this could mean other groups might reserve fields before BCC, Parks staff emphasized that this approach promotes fairness and accessibility to groups that have had limited opportunity for Priority Use in the past, aligning with the goal of creating a more equitable permit policy.

In addition to the proposed changes to Priority Use, BCC also shared concerns with the current special event and tournament policy, highlighting that these events sometimes displace local youth groups who hold Priority Use Permits for Game Only fields. Parks staff confirmed that such displacements occurred during county tournaments hosted by other organizations. In response, Parks staff committed to being more selective in reviewing new tournament requests that proposed to displace Priority Use permit holders as an interim measure, while Parks staff conduct a thorough review of the Special Event and Tournament Policy.

Takoma Park Soccer has provided Montgomery Parks with a letter (Attachment G) addressing their major concerns with the new policy. Their concerns of the effects of losing Priority Use Hours for both

weekend days. They have made a few suggestions to the Policy to include Implement the new policy in stages, give Saturday and Sunday youth leagues a transition period, or give a slight priority to youth leagues over adult leagues. Montgomery Parks has reviewed their suggestions and can accommodate a one-year adjustment period from the date of the approved policy. Montgomery Parks will work with user groups to allow them to choose their preferred days in alignment with the new policy.

INITIAL USER SURVEY

To ensure that the 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy* reflects community needs, Parks staff actively sought feedback from user groups at the outset of this process. Input received through this survey guided research and discussions on potential policy changes. In February 2024, staff distributed an initial survey to more than 800 recipients who had reserved Montgomery Parks' athletic fields over the previous two years. The survey remained open for approximately three weeks, resulting in 74 responses representing 49 different leagues. These leagues span a diverse array of sports—including rugby, field hockey, baseball, softball, football, and soccer—demonstrating the wide reach of Parks athletic programs.

Respondents provided thoughtful comments covering a variety of important topics, such as extending the deadline for returning unneeded permit hours, enforcing rules at batting cages, and addressing Ghost Permitting (when fields are permitted but left unused). Other key issues raised included the ability to practice on Game Only fields, the criteria and order in which permits are considered, Priority Use, the length and timing of permit seasons, refund policies, return deadlines, special use permits, and field availability during holidays. User feedback highlighted challenges with the current system, and included comments such as: “Reservations seem to favor historical users, larger organizations that monopolize the use of soccer fields,” and “We find ourselves in a scramble for practice space, driving past empty fields that are reserved.” One participant noted, “Historical Use is a broken system. A lot of organizations request the permit and receive it based on historical use; however, they do not utilize the field.” These insights underscore the importance of making the permit process more transparent, equitable, and responsive to the needs of all user groups. The full collection of survey data is included in Attachment C.

User Groups' Top 4 Priorities

Parks staff asked survey respondents to identify the top three sections of the 2013 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy* they felt were most in need of review, helping staff determine where to focus efforts during the evaluation process. Permitting Season emerged as the highest priority, followed by the Permit Application schedule, Release Dates for Unneeded Field Time, and Criteria—which includes the order in which permits are allocated and encompasses the important topic of Priority Use. Each of these priorities is discussed in more detail, below.

Table 1: Voting results from initial survey

Section	Policy statement	Criteria	Permitting Season	Permit Application Schedule	Release Dates for unneeded Field Time	Artificial Turf	holiday use Regulations	Off-Season Use Regulations	Field Use for Non-Designated Sports	Field Renovation Guidelines	General guidelines for Field Use	Permit Denial and Revocation	Application Procedures	Fee Schedule	Cancellations and Refunds
Votes	12	14	22	16	15	6	4	3	3	1	5	7	7	4	10
Percentage by total votes	9%	11%	17%	12%	12%	5%	3%	2%	2%	1%	4%	5%	5%	3%	8%
Percentage by people who voted ¹	21%	24%	38%	28%	26%	10%	7%	5%	5%	2%	9%	12%	12%	7%	17%

¹ Not all respondents voted on all questions of the survey.

User Priority 1: Permitting Season

Many participants expressed desire for field reservations that begin earlier in the season or for the season to be extended year-round, provided field conditions remain favorable. Several groups specifically requested that the fall season continue into December. Additionally, some advocated for Game Only fields to open in alignment with Practice/ Game fields.

Parks staff recognize the importance of maximizing recreational opportunities for all user groups; however, it is essential to balance these requests with the realities of the local climate and the need to protect natural grass fields. Extending the season beyond the current timeframes would likely result in more frequent rainouts and increased frustration among users, as well as a higher risk of field damage. For these reasons, the 2026 Policy retains the established seasonal limitations for natural grass fields. This practice will ensure long-term usability and field quality for all users.

User Priority 2: Permit Application

The Permit Application section ranked as the second-highest priority among survey respondents, with 14 comments addressing concerns related to the permitting process and reservation scheduling. Feedback on this priority included requests to allow permits for unprogrammed open spaces, suggestions to split fields and reserve individual halves, and calls for greater consistency by combining Montgomery Parks Permitting with Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF). Many user groups expressed a desire for more flexible and accessible permitting dates—for example, shifting the Go-Live time to later in the day, shortening the advance reservation window from its current seven days, and extending the deadline for returning unneeded field time. Upon review, Parks staff found that this section was not fully aligned with current practices and updated the

new 2026 *Policy* to address these needs, making the process clearer, more consistent, and user-friendly.

User Priority 3: Release Dates for Unneeded Time

The section on Release Dates for unneeded time garnered significant interest in survey voting, though it received relatively few detailed comments. The main feedback was centered on requests to extend the deadline for returning unneeded Priority Use hours. While such an extension would certainly benefit the user group that initially holds field time, it is important to note that decisions about returning these hours must be made before the *Go-Live* event. This timing ensures that released field hours are promptly made available to other groups during the permitting season, thereby maximizing access and fairness for all user groups.

User Priority 4: Permit Order Criteria Section

The Permit Order Criteria section generated significant feedback from respondents, with many user groups expressing concerns about the current order in which Montgomery Parks processes permit applications. A common sentiment was that the top-priority group often receives the majority of available field time, leaving limited access for others further down the priority list. One survey respondent suggested that individual teams should be given equal consideration as leagues, rather than leagues being prioritized. Additionally, another respondent advocated for youth groups to be prioritized over adult users, and for priority consideration to be extended to neighborhood-based organizations.

Priority Use, although not thoroughly defined in the 2013 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*, is closely tied to the Criteria section and was a prominent theme in the survey with 17 respondents commenting on the subject. As previously discussed, Priority Use status enables organizations to reserve field time before permits are available for the general public. Priority Use permitting is based on consistent historical use of a particular field at the same date and time for two consecutive years. Survey respondent feedback on Priority Use reflected a wide range of perspectives: larger leagues emphasized the necessity of Priority Use for their operations, whereas smaller groups felt that the policy allows larger organizations to monopolize field time at the expense of groups lacking priority status. Respondents offered several suggestions to improve fairness and clarity, including ensuring leagues do not lose Priority Use hours if they return unused time, allowing leagues to swap Priority Use hours among themselves, extending Priority Use eligibility to individual teams (rather than leagues), and more clearly define Priority Use within the revised policy. Although staff understand the leagues' perspective on the potential impact of losing Priority Use status, one of the goals of the subject policy update is to improve field access and equity. Limiting historic priority use to the proposed four days helps to create opportunities for new users and historically disenfranchised groups.

These insights highlight the need for a more transparent, equitable, and well-articulated approach to allocating field time, so that all user groups feel their needs are acknowledged and addressed. In response to respondent's comments on the Priority Use element of the 2026 *Policy*, staff updated the practice to reduce Priority Use eligibility from seven days per week to four days per week. Additional discussion of this modification is provided at the beginning of this Staff Report.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT EVENTS

Following the results of the initial survey, Parks staff held several internal meetings to determine which suggestions were feasible and to determine areas where more feedback was required. To gain deeper insights on key issues raised through the survey, the staff conducted a series of focus groups to engage stakeholders more directly. In partnership with Brick and Story, a consultant specializing in public outreach, Parks staff developed and facilitated several focus groups during the fall of 2024. These focus groups discussed the existing 2013 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy* and explored specific challenges such as barriers to field access, Ghost Permitting, practice on Game Only fields, and the Priority Use system.

Four distinct focus groups were organized with each group representing a unique audience within the broader athletic field user community. This strategy allowed staff to solicit input from users who are often underrepresented in the policy process: Under-Represented Sports Leagues, Spanish-Speaking Leagues, and Low-to-Moderate Income Serving Leagues. In addition to these groups, Parks staff also facilitated a group of users who historically hold Priority Use Permit status.



Figure 5: Spanish Speaking Leagues Focus Group

The first two focus groups, Spanish-Speaking leagues and Low-to-Moderate Income Serving Leagues, were held at the Wheaton Headquarters Building and offered both in-person and virtual attendance options. The second two focus groups, Under-Represented Sports Leagues and Priority Use Permit Holders, were held exclusively online. Attendance at each session ranged from 7 to 15 participants, engaging a total of 42 individuals who represented more than 30 leagues. All sessions were recorded, and Brick and Story staff took detailed notes to capture key feedback and observations. Additionally, any invitees unable to attend were contacted directly by Brick and Story and given the opportunity to provide their input, which was also incorporated into the consultant's final report (Attachment D).

During the planning phase for these focus groups, the consultant recommended conducting two pop-up on-site engagement events at athletic fields that were not under permit to connect directly with walk-on field³ users. Montgomery Parks identified several locations where walk-on play was believed to occur and deployed infrared cameras to confirm this pattern of use. The first pop-up outreach event took place at Jesup Blair Local Park. The second began at Rosemary Hills Local Park, but due to limited foot traffic, was relocated to Meadowbrook Local Park, where a walk-on game was actively taking place.



Figure 6: Pop Outreach event at Jesup Blair Local Park

These pop-up outreach sessions included interactive boards where users could share feedback by placing stickers on elements that interested them. One interactive board asked users what factors influenced their choice of playing field, while another assessed patrons' knowledge of the *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*. To ensure inclusivity, both pop-ups, as well as the Spanish-speaking league focus group, were staffed by at least one Spanish-speaking member of the Brick and Story team.

Several key findings emerged from the pop-up events and focus groups, highlighting broad challenges as well as specific concerns around Priority Use, Ghost Permitting, and differing maintenance standards for Practice/ Game fields and Game Only fields. Many participants cited confusion about the permitting system, including how to secure Priority Use status, the maximum number of days allowed through Priority Use, and other critical policy details that create barriers to access, particularly for

³ Walk-on field users are members of the public who use athletic fields without permit reservations.

newer or smaller leagues. Another recurring issue was the limited availability of fields, especially those with synthetic turf and lighting. Participants pointed to inconsistencies between obtaining permits through Montgomery Parks versus Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF), adding another layer of complexity for permit holders. Each of these concerns is described in more detail, below.

Priority Use Policy

Sentiments regarding the Priority Use Policy were mixed: historic leagues valued the stability and advantages it provides to their leagues, while newer and smaller leagues felt it restricted their opportunities to access fields. Some Spanish-speaking groups specifically noted that the policy enables established leagues to monopolize field time, which they felt no longer aligns with the county's changing demographics.

Leagues serving low-to-moderate income (LMI) communities felt their unique role in providing opportunities for lower-income youth should be recognized and prioritized within the permit process. LMI community representatives advocated for consideration of the populations they serve when allocating field access.

Historic user groups emphasized that the current Priority Use system enables them to operate efficiently and serve hundreds, if not thousands, of young athletes. However, these groups suggested that Priority Use allocations should be more closely tied to the actual size of the organization, ensuring a fairer distribution of field access. Additionally, they recommended that returning unused Priority Use hours should not automatically result in losing those hours for the following year.

Leagues representing underrepresented sports highlighted significant difficulties in securing field permits, largely due to the current structure of the Priority Use. They were receptive to restructuring Priority Use allocations to mirror the Community Use of Public Facilities (CUPF) model, which grants access for three weekdays and one weekend day, offering a more balanced and accessible approach. Additionally, historic user groups recommended introducing a dedicated feature on the permitting website that would enable users to easily report instances of Ghost Permitting. This enhancement would promote greater transparency and fairness in field allocation, ensuring that all user groups have equitable access to athletic facilities.

Ghost Permitting

Ghost Permitting emerged as a significant concern raised through this portion of outreach, with clear statements that some fields are permitted to leagues that don't use the facilities and as a result, the fields remain unused and sit empty. Additionally, there is widespread uncertainty about the proper process for reporting instances of Ghost Permitting. Many participants felt that the current Priority Use, coupled with the existing fee structure for returning unneeded field time, inadvertently encourages this practice. Addressing and reducing Ghost Permitting would help free up more fields, thereby increasing availability for community members and ensuring more equitable access to athletic facilities.

Field Maintenance Standards

Lastly, the existing two-tier natural grass system received mixed reviews. While most user groups expressed appreciation for the superior quality of fields designated as Game Only fields, they

noted that the limited number of these high-quality fields makes access to this class of facility challenging. Many participants pointed out that the overall condition of Practice/Game fields is subpar, which, in turn, increases demand for the better-maintained Game Only fields. However, there was a consensus that simply allowing practices on Game Only fields would not resolve the issue. Instead, some groups indicated they would be willing to pay higher fees for Practice/Game fields if it meant that field classification was maintained at a higher standard.

Communication Barriers

There were several group-specific comments that highlighted unique challenges and perspectives. Spanish-speaking leagues voiced dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of Spanish-speaking staff at the permits office, stating that their experience made the permitting process more difficult. However, the Permits Office does have bilingual staff available to assist Spanish-speaking users. These groups also raised concerns about larger leagues monopolizing field time, resulting in their teams often having to play on lower-quality fields.

Follow-up Action

Some of the key takeaways from the outreach events and analysis of the survey results, offered several recommendations to promote equitable access and use of athletic fields. Generally speaking, permit fees are not a significant barrier to field usage. However, outreach results indicated that the current Priority Use Policy could help address many of the inequities it creates for user groups.

Since only 44% of Regional/Recreational fields and 20% of parks are in Community Equity Index (CEI) areas (Slightly Disproportionate, Moderately Disproportionate, and Highly Disproportionate), staff will focus on strategic improvements to park and field development within those neighborhoods. , By prioritizing new facilities and improvements in these underserved areas, Montgomery Parks will ensure more balanced park and field access across the county.

FOLLOW-UP USER SURVEY

After receiving feedback from the initial survey, focus groups, pop-up events, and internal discussion, Montgomery Parks created a draft Athletic Field Use Permit Policy and published the follow-up survey to provide an opportunity for users to share feedback on the draft. The follow-up survey and draft 2026 Policy were published in mid-September 2025 using a web link shared with all user groups and stakeholders who had participated in earlier outreach efforts. The survey was open for one month and received a total of 79 responses. Two additional comment submissions were sent to staff via email (Attachment C).

Given differing demands for athletic fields across various sports, the survey asked users to specify the primary sport their group played on Montgomery Parks fields. Of the survey participants who specified a primary sport, 43 responses (54%) were from those involved in baseball, 16 from softball (20%), and 10 from soccer (13%). Additionally, cricket and rugby each had one respondent, while several participants indicated involvement in multiple sports. In total, feedback was received from 24 unique leagues or individuals. Bethesda Chevy Chase Baseball stood out as the most engaged group,

submitting over 50 responses. Montgomery Soccer Inc. and Montgomery County Little League also provided multiple submissions, highlighting strong representation from these organizations.

Unlike the initial survey, the follow-up survey did not ask users to rank their biggest concerns with the existing policy and instead focused on soliciting feedback on the draft 2026 *Policy* document. The most prominent concerns with the draft 2026 *Policy* included special use events, field classification, the cost of returned permit hour fees, privacy concerns over roster data submissions, and the reduction of Priority Use hours. Each of these concerns is addressed below.

Special Use Events and Field Classification

The follow-up survey highlighted concerns regarding both Special Use events and the classification of Game Only Fields. Regarding Special Use events, two key issues emerged. First, stakeholders were worried about limitations on submitting special event requests after certain dates; Montgomery Parks addressed this by updating the policy language to clarify submission deadlines. Second, there was significant concern that special events, particularly those catering to out-of-county groups, have displaced local community games. Montgomery Parks recognizes the impact of this issue and will review policies specifically related to this practice.

Returned Permit Hour Fees

Several leagues expressed concern that the current return fees are higher than necessary. The transition from a flat fee to a percentage-based fee led some groups to worry that the costs associated with returning field time could become excessive. Additionally, one group recommended that refunds should only be issued if the returned hours are successfully re-permitted to another user, ensuring a fair and efficient process for all parties involved.

Roster Data Privacy Concerns

Many participants expressed concerns about privacy within the context of demonstrating a league's eligibility for Priority Use status. As originally proposed, the draft 2026 *Policy* required leagues to submit roster data to prove that two-thirds of a league's participants are Montgomery County Residents. In addition to privacy concerns, respondents also noted that the process of compiling and submitting this roster data would be time-consuming and unnecessarily cumbersome. The Sports Advisory Committee also expressed apprehension about the requirement of roster data and this requirement prevents equity leagues from aspiring to Priority Use. In response to these concerns, staff revised the 2026 *Policy* language to state that roster data must be provided to the Parks Department upon request to verification that the league is predominantly Montgomery County residents.

Priority Use Reduction

Another concern highlighted in the survey was the proposed reduction of Priority Use hours. Six leagues expressed apprehension about losing some of their existing Priority Use allocations. Many leagues were worried that they would lose the ability to permit fields they have permitted for years and would not be able to serve their respective communities with this new policy.

CONCLUSION

Following a thorough review of the existing 2013 *Policy* and an inclusive public input process, Parks staff are pleased to recommend approval of the 2026 *Athletic Field Use Permit Policy*. Adoption of this revised policy will improve equity and access to permitted athletic fields for county residents.

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Draft 2026 Athletic Field Use Permit Policy
- B. Approved 2013 Athletic Field Use Permit Policy
- C. Survey Responses
- D. Outreach Summary
- E. Sports Advisory Committee Letter
- F. Montgomery County Recreation Letter
- G. Takoma Soccer Letter

Signature: 

Email: carl.weber@montgomeryparks.org

Signature: 

Email: matthew.folden@montgomeryparks.org

Signature: 

Email: christie.ciabotti@montgomeryparks.org

Signature: 

Email: darren.flusche@montgomeryparks.org

MCPB Athletic Field Use Permit Policy FINAL 26120

Final Audit Report

2026-01-21

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