

Subject: Options on Nature Center Hours
Related Department: DPR

FY 2025 Proposed Budget
Budget Work Session Follow-up

4/8/2024

The following information is provided in response to a request made by Ms. Garvey at the work session on April 2, 2024, regarding the following question:

What would it take to accomplish expanding Nature Center hours?

The Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) manages two Nature Centers, Long Branch and Gulf Branch. To expand Nature Center hours, DPR would need to:

1. Add 1.0 FTE Gulf Branch Manager (Nature Center Specialist) (\$125,000)
2. Add \$60,000 in additional temporary staff funding

Background

In the fall of 2019, a public safety incident occurred in a DPR community center. In response, DPR engaged with the Beau Biden Foundation in 2020 to help guide the department in its work to strengthen policies, procedures, and practices to protect youth and other vulnerable members of the community. One of the first policies recommended for the entire department was ensuring that there are always at least two adult staff members in a community or nature center. This policy doubled the temporary staffing hours required to staff the nature centers with no commensurate increase in temporary staff budget. As a result, the policy has impacted DPR's ability to reopen its nature centers to pre-pandemic levels.

Program Data

An expansion of hours at the County's nature centers would help achieve a strategy of Countywide access, equity, and engagement as well as meet commitments laid out in the 2019 Public Space Master Plan, the Forestry and Natural Resources Master Plan, the Department of Parks and Recreation Strategic Plan, and Biophilic Cities framework.

Prior to the pandemic, the Nature Centers were open for approximately 4,000 hours each year. Currently, the Nature Centers are open approximately 2,180 hours per year as outlined in the table below. Note that hours for the NOVA Park's Potomac Overlook nature center are shown to indicate current access to nature centers across the County.

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Hours Pre-Pandemic (March 2020 and Prior):

	Long Branch	Gulf Branch	Potomac Overlook
Sunday	1pm-5pm	1pm-5pm	1pm-5pm
Monday			
Tuesday	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Wednesday	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Thursday	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Friday	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Saturday	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Hours Open to Public:	39	39	39

Current Hours (March 2024):

	Long Branch	Gulf Branch	Potomac Overlook
Sunday			1pm-5pm
Monday			
Tuesday	10am – 5pm		10am – 5pm
Wednesday	10am – 5pm		10am – 5pm
Thursday		10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Friday		10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Saturday	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm	10am – 5pm
Hours Open to Public:	21	21	39

With additional funding of \$185,000, the nature centers could be open for approximately 4,360 hours per year. The funding would allow the nature centers to return to pre-pandemic operating hours and expand weekend and evening hours.

To expand to the nature center hours, DPR's C&I Unit must expand its staff capacity with increased temporary staff funding and a dedicated, full-time manager for Gulf Branch Nature Center.

The \$125,000 would restore the Gulf Branch Manager position to:

- Provide dedicated leadership for the facility, coordinate program-wide volunteer engagement, free up Park Naturalists to provide Countywide programming and engagement and assist with covering staffing hours required to open the facility more hours.
- Allow the C&I Unit manager, who currently also manages Gulf Branch, to focus on leading and growing the C&I Unit to meet the goals of the DPR Strategic Plan, PSMP, and FNRP.

The \$60,000 for temporary staff would:

- Restore Nature Center hours to pre-pandemic operating hours

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- Expand nature center hours to increase access for nature center visitation, particularly for individuals who are not able to visit during traditional work or school hours.