

June 10, 2024

Honorable Chair Libby Garvey
Arlington County Board
Ellen M. Bozman Government Center
2100 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 300
Arlington, VA 22201

Re: Parks and Rec CIP budget for FY 2025- FY2034

Dear Chair Garvey:

The Forestry and Natural Resources Commission is encouraged and pleased by the proposed 10-year Capital Improvement Plan budget for the Department of Parks and Recreation. The big increase for land acquisition (to \$13 million) and the \$5.5 million for the natural resilience program are important steps forward, for example.

However, the FNRC asks that the County consider the following suggestions for making an excellent budget proposal even better.

“Mainstream” the enhancement of natural capital and natural resilience into all relevant capital budget projects. It’s great that the CIP recognizes the importance of natural capital and includes funding for the natural resiliency program. The FNRC believes, however, that this effort does not go far enough.

Arlington County’s natural capital is precious and essential to the quality of life for all our citizens. The County should, therefore, explicitly evaluate the impacts on natural capital—and the potential for enhancing that natural capital—in *every* capital project and investment. In management jargon, this would mean “mainstreaming” the goal of increasing natural capital in all decisions and policies made under in the CIP, rather than having only the current stand-alone resiliency and natural capital program.

To give just one example of how this could work, consider the plans in the CIP for the three small urban parks near Virginia Square—Maury Park, Gum Ball Park, and Milliken Park. Imagine if, in addition to surveying neighbors about what they want in those parks, the County set a firm goal of improving natural capital. The final plans for each park might then include a small native plant meadow, a Miyawaki forest, or some other feature that both delights and educates park users, and adds to the County’s natural capital.

The FNRC thus recommends including an explicit target of enhancing natural capital in all projects in the CIP, everything from the Arlington boathouse to the renovations of Quincy Park and Gateway Park.

Commission Members

Phil Klingelhofer, Chair
John Carey
Caroline Haynes
David Howell
Kate Donohue
Stephen Sockwell
Josh Handler
Mikaila Milton
Noreen Hannigan
Bill Browning
Bob Benson
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The modest costs of developing and implementing plans for enhancing natural capital in each project could come from the \$5.5 million in natural capital resiliency funds or from a small additional dedicated fund. Either way, the long-term benefits would far outweigh the small upfront costs.

Further increase the land acquisition budget. The big increase in the land acquisition budget (to \$13 million) is a major step forward. The unfortunate truth, though, is that it does not match the need. To put it bluntly, Arlington is in a race against time. The tree canopy is in decline, precipitously so in some neighborhoods. Population is increasing. Commercial development shows signs of a post-pandemic increase. Property values are soaring. And climate change is bringing more extreme storms and heat waves. All these trends starkly highlight how much we depend on the many ecosystem services and other benefits that parklands, and other open spaces and “green” infrastructure, provide.

The FNRC therefore urges the County to snap up as much land as possible, as quickly as possible, before property values rise even further. Arlington now has only a small window of opportunity to lock in the needs we will have for parklands and open space in decades to come. Yes, the price tag is high. But investing now will pay enormous dividends in perpetuity, and County Board members who support increases in the land acquisition budget now will earn the gratitude of many generations to come.

Explore increasing the CIP budget through Community Change Grants in the Inflation Reduction Act. The Environmental Protection Agency [is now offering \\$2 billion](#) for “environmental and climate justice activities to benefit disadvantaged communities through projects that reduce pollution, increase community climate resilience, and build community capacity to address environmental and climate justice challenges.”

Arlington County has done a commendable job of including equity considerations in the CIP. But why not explore taking another leap forward by leveraging the resources offered by the federal government? According to the criteria for eligibility, Arlington County can partner with a community-based organization to apply for funds to directly increase the resilience of historically disadvantaged communities. A successful application for funds to acquire more land for parks in Green Valley or Johnson’s Hill, for example, could be a win-win-win-win for Arlington. It would enhance the quality of life and resilience of those neighborhoods, reduce historic inequities, offer opportunities for growing County’s overall tree canopy coverage (bringing a host of benefits, such as reducing the urban heat island effect and stormwater flooding), and providing substantial new resources for the CIP budget.

Invest in the Nature Centers. Both the Public Spaces Master Plan and new Forestry and Natural Resources Plan emphasize the importance of educating County residents about the natural world and the many benefits it provides. It’s especially unfortunate, therefore, that the County has not been adequately supporting one of its most effective tools for education—the Nature Centers. Both the Gulf Branch Nature Center and the Long Branch Nature Center have been sadly neglected, with many exhibits dating back to the 1960s.

The FNRC thus supports the recommendation of the Friends of the Gulf Branch Nature Center for a modest investment of \$750,000 for each of the two centers to upgrade or expand facilities, educational programs, and exhibits. This is another expenditure that should be viewed as an investment in the future instead of just a current cost, since it will pay off significantly in the form of stronger support for nature and the ecosystems that improve the quality of life in the County.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our views.

Sincerely,



Phil Klingelhofer, Chair

Forestry and Natural Resources Commission

Cc: Members, Arlington County Board
Mark Schwartz, Arlington County Manager
Jane Rudolph, Director, Department of Parks and Recreation