



ARLINGTON COUNTY
SPORTS COMMISSION
2100 Clarendon Boulevard, Suite 414
Arlington, Virginia 22201



February 14, 2021

The Honorable Matt de Ferranti
Chairman
Arlington County Board
2100 Clarendon Blvd
Arlington, VA 22201

Dear Mr. de Ferranti,

I am pleased to provide the 2020 annual report on the activities of the Sports Commission.

If you or the other Board members have any feedback or questions about this report, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shirley Brothwell".

Shirley Brothwell, Chair

Cc: County Board Members

Arlington Sports Commission 2020 Annual Report & 2021 Annual Plan

Summary

The 2020 annual report is a testament to continuity and dedication in difficult times. The Covid-19 pandemic led to unprecedented and ever-changing restrictions on the use of sports facilities, constrained the ability to carry out traditional sports activities, and disrupted the Sports Commission's plans for its 2020 agenda. Despite these many challenges, however, the Commission still had a productive year.

The Commission met 8 times, twice before Commission activities were suspended in March 2020 and 6 times after such activities resumed. Our activities have been guided for several years by four priorities: (1) examining the capacity and use of recreational facilities; (2) understanding and supporting underserved groups and communities; (3) increasing our engagement with advisory Commissions and key stakeholders; and (4) participating in County projects and processes as warranted. We made progress in each area and adapted our agendas to discuss pressing issues that arose because of the pandemic.

Structure, Operations, and Membership

In December 2020, the County Board [approved an updated charter](#) which better reflects the Commission's role; relationship with the County Board, DPR, sports leagues, and other stakeholders; and its areas of focus. The Commission, which has 15 members, was fully staffed throughout most of 2020. Commission members included: John Bacon, Shirley Brothwell, Jessica Deegan-Paska, Sherry Kohan, Dave Maher (left November 2020), John Mingus, Drew Murray, Kristi Sawert, Ryan Schaefer (left November 2020), Steve Severn, Nancy Sharkey, Megan Sheckles, George Thompson, David Tornquist, Frank Tranfa (joined December 2020) and Justin Wilt. Shirley Brothwell served as the Commission Chair in 2020. Justin Wilt was the Vice Chair.

In 2019, the Commission embarked on an effort to ensure full and fair coverage of all Arlington sports activities and groups by assigning outreach responsibilities to each Commissioner. We identified over 40 sports, constituent groups, and advisory bodies that the Commission does or should represent. Our plan for commencing the learning process from this approach was disrupted by the pandemic, and we are working to resume outreach to inform our 2021 agenda.

The Commission has sole authority over two subsidiary bodies -- the Arlington Youth Baseball Authority (AYBA) and the Diamond Field Fund Committee.¹ In addition, the Aquatics Committee is a joint committee of the Sports Commission and Arlington Public Schools (APS) that reports independently to the School Board and through the Sports Commission to the County Board on issues related to the adequacy and efficiency of aquatic-related programs and facilities.

¹ The Arlington Youth Baseball Authority is charged with improving the baseball experience for ballplayers ages 12 & under, focusing specifically on making progress toward the consolidation of two league-run youth baseball programs. The Diamond Field Fund Committee consults with diamond field users to identify projects that should be funded using diamond field user fees.

The Commission was an official member of 3 County workgroups: the [Public Spaces Master Plan Implementation Advisory Committee](#) (PSMP-IAC);² the [Field Fund Working Group](#) (FFWG);³ and the Greenbrier Park Operations Committee.⁴ The activities of the first two are addressed in this report.

Issues Addressed in 2020

The Commission’s 2020 deliberations and discussions addressed many of its four priority areas as well as several new issues, covered below under “Other Topics.”

Examining the Capacity and Use of Recreational Facilities

- **Budget** - The Commission was pleased and excited by the County Manager’s 2021 budget as originally presented to the County Board. The budget provided for many positive developments for recreational facilities, including funding to complete construction on and open Lubber Run Community Center and Long Bridge Park Aquatics and Fitness Center and begin implementation of the Jennie Dean Park Master Plan. The CIP also envisioned robust near- and longer-term investments in synthetic turf replacement and conversion, which are essential for maintaining Arlington’s heavily-used athletic fields and increasing playable time on natural grass fields. In our remarks to the County Board during the Department of Parks and Recreation’s (DPR) initial working session, we expressed appreciation for the budgetary and CIP support for Arlington’s athletic facilities infrastructure.

Owing to lower revenue projects because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the revised budget provided for continued construction on Lubber Run and Long Bridge but delayed their openings to not earlier than summer 2022. Work also proceeded, to the extent possible, on Jennie Dean Park.

The Commission appreciates that even in difficult financial times, Arlington leaders maintained an appropriate and prudent level of commitment to recreational facilities investment. Outdoor facilities in particular proved to be of tremendous value throughout 2020 as alternatives to shuttered indoor spaces, giving residents spaces to safely recreate and engage in both organized and casual athletic activities.

- **PSMP IAC** – Meetings have addressed athletic fields and utilization; casual use spaces inventory; biophilic cities network; Forestry and Natural Resources Plan; and other topics.

The group’s consideration of athletic fields and utilization is particularly germane to the Commission’s charge. The County has solicited input on the development of a framework to

² This group provides input and feedback to the county on the implementation of the PSMP. Focus areas include the Integrated Forestry & Natural Resources Master Plan; field utilization/lighting/turf; Zoning Regulation review; and casual use spaces. The group met 6 times in 2020.

³ The working group was established by the Sports Commission to examine field user fees and their implementation. Co-chaired by the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), the group includes representatives from the Sports Commission, Park and Recreation Commission, Fiscal Affairs Advisory Commission, and Arlington Partnership for Children Youth and Families. It met 5 times in 2020.

⁴ The Committee facilitates dialogue among Greenbrier Park users and the surrounding neighborhood. It met once in 2020.

determine more nuanced and accurate measures of field availability and utilization, taking into account factors that might affect field usage including, for example: field size/age group, realistic start and stop times given age of users and daylight hours, field surface (grass v turf), lights, etc. DPR recently disseminated an online feedback form to serve as public engagement on these topics. The IAC also has received updates on the field reservation system and how the county is working to systematize data about when fields were closed and when they were reserved. These steps will help DPR determine its true inventory and then work on issues associated with allocating, maintaining, and potentially expanding the inventory through replacing natural grass with turf and/or adding lights to expand the playable hours being captured in the inventory.

The group's consideration of casual use space is also important to our charge. As the County attempts to inventory casual use space, the group has discussed what types of amenities should be included in 'casual use.' The concept is new, and the design characteristics are very loosely defined to include open, natural, flexible, and visible. While permit-only fields are not considered to be casual use space, there is less agreement on whether permit-takes-priority fields are also casual use space. (Such fields were defined as casual use space in the Public Spaces Master Plan.)

- Field Fund Working Group – In 2019, the Commission set up a working group to examine and make recommendations about the level and implementation of fees collected from permitted users of Arlington's rectangular and diamond fields. Information about the group's charge and its activities [can be found on its website](#).⁵ As directed by its charge, the group examined information about the purpose and use of field fees; field fees and implementation in neighboring jurisdictions; and the nature of field maintenance in Arlington. The group drafted initial recommendations for which it is now collecting input and feedback. It will present a final report to the Commission later in 2021.
- Aquatics Safety – The Aquatics Committee representative presented equity data obtained from APS's Water Safety instructional program at the elementary-school level, in which students in third and fourth grade receive five hours of swimming and water-safety instruction. APS data shows that prior to the training, 35% of third-graders at 3 representative elementary schools with a greater than 60% free and reduced lunch population were "non-safe swimmers" (i.e., most at risk for drowning) compared to 2% of third-graders at 3 representative elementary schools with a less than 5% free and reduced lunch rate. After participation in the APS program, the percentage of non-safe swimmers in the former group dropped to 2.8%. This outcome metric demonstrates the value of the APS's Water Safety instructional program.
- DPR Updates – County staff provided updates to the Commission on a range of facilities projects, including Jennie Dean Park, Gunston Middle School synthetic turf replacement, a capital project to update the Gunston bubble, delays to the TJ Upper Field conversion from natural grass to synthetic turf, and delays to the opening of Lubber Run Community Center and the Long Bridge Park facility. The Commission also took a tour of the Lubber Run facility, examining both indoor and outdoor spaces.

⁵ [https:// Commission.commissions.arlingtonva.us/field-fund-working-group/](https://Commission.commissions.arlingtonva.us/field-fund-working-group/)

- **Synthetic Turf** – The Commission wrote a [letter to the Arlington County Public Health Director, Dr. Varghese](#) to request his input on issues related to synthetic turf safety. The Commission has previously received briefings on the safety of in-fill materials but notes that less attention has been paid to the safety of the artificial grass fibers. We will continue to explore what research has been conducted on this issue.

Underserved Groups and Communities

During a February joint meeting of the Sports Commission and Park and Recreation Commission, the two groups engaged in a discussion about equity. Both Commissions received briefings in 2019 from members of the Destination 2027 Steering Committee, outlining their April 2019 report’s findings that health disparities exist in Arlington along racial and economic lines.⁶ The report recommended that Arlington County adopt a Health Equity Policy and apply equity considerations in decision making across all sectors. In response, the Commissions discussed equity and what they can do to advance the equity conversation. We focused in part on how to define and think about equity in ways that consider racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, gender, and geographic/location differences.

During the discussion, the Sports Commission shared that, through its focus on underserved groups, it knows that large portions of Arlington’s school age community do not engage in recreational sports activity.⁷ League data shows that student populations at more disadvantaged schools uniformly opt out of organized sports activity. We further know that barriers to participation include financial resources, language, transportation, and family circumstances. Efforts have been made by the Commission and by individual leagues to engage these student populations in sports such as soccer, baseball, and futsal.

From these programs, the following observations can be made:

- Early introduction to sports is important for longer term skill development. Early outreach to underserved youth is important to foster skill equity.
- Fee reductions address the equity issue but only benefit those that manage to overcome all other barriers and “come in the door.” Additional outreach is needed to less connected populations.
- Equity in facility access needs to be part of the conversation. Some communities have less or more limited access to certain facilities, particularly pools. Equity could mean ensuring even distribution of facilities throughout Arlington and increasing access to drop-in, unprogrammed spaces.
- Data shows that there is a huge racial/ethnic/socioeconomic disparity between children who possess life-saving aquatic skills and those susceptible to drowning. Equity could mean improving access to these life-saving skills.

The two Commissions committed to continue talking to each other about equity and what can be done to improve equity in their respective areas.

⁶ [Arlington’s Plan for Achieving Health Equity by 2027](#), A Report of the Destination 2027 Steering Committee, April 2019.

⁷ Youth sports leagues tend to see lower participation rates from schools where higher portions of the student population qualify for Free and Reduced School Meals.

Improving Commission Networks

The Commission improved its networks in 2020 through:

- continued investment in its relationship with the PRC;
- receiving presentations from new (to us) groups including Arlington Field Hockey, the Bicycle Advisory Committee, and the Arlington Regional Master Naturalists; and
- participation in official groups like the PSMP IAC and the Field Fund Working Group that allow us to meet and interact with representatives from other advisory bodies and parts of the community.

Continued expansion of its networks in 2021 will help the Commission build and leverage partnerships to improve its advisory and advocacy activities.

Participate in County Projects and Processes

The Commission's participation in County projects and processes was limited to the PSMP IAC and the FFWG. The Commission was a signatory on a multi-commission letter in June 2020 asking the County Board to lift restrictions imposed in March 2020 on Advisory Commission activities, noting that such restrictions were antithetical to the Arlington Way and deprived the Board of valuable constituent advice and perspectives.

Other Topics

- COVID-related Topics – We received multiple briefings from DPR about facilities restrictions, closures, and openings it had implemented in response to the Governor's state-wide pandemic guidelines. DPR also briefed the Commission on steps it was taking to adjust its programming to be outdoors instead of indoors or virtual instead of in-person. Our August meeting was dedicated to hearing from youth sports leagues about their plans for and experiences with hosting recreational and travel sports activities during the summer. We summarized these experiences in a [letter to the County Board](#).
- Aquatics Committee – The Aquatics Committee also took steps in 2020 to revise its charter. The Commission forwarded to the County Board [a letter from the Committee](#) along with its proposed charter, and our comments on their proposal. The Committee proposed dropping the requirement that it report to the County Board through the Sports Commission, but rather allow it to report directly to both the County and School Boards. It also proposed that its jurisdiction be expanded to cover pools in both County and APS facilities (i.e., adding the pool at Long Bridge Park to its jurisdiction). The Committee's rationale for these changes was to improve the timeliness of its communication to the County Board and to consolidate advisory concerning all pools and pool programming. A majority of the Commission did not support a single-sport advisory Commission or the removal of Long Bridge Park from the Commission's jurisdictional scope.
- Camp Contracts – The Commission heard a presentation from DPR's summer camp contractor who were concerned about changes that DPR made to camp registration procedures and revenue sharing arrangements. DPR made the changes to provide improved customer service to camp registrants and to ensure consistency in camp refund and credit policies. Contractors felt the changes were made without their input, announced with limited warning, and created financial challenges for them.

- Youth Sport Participant Safety – DPR presented information about its policies to ensure that all DPR program participants are protected from inappropriate or abusive behavior. Following an event in 2019, DPR reviewed and tightened its policies. DPR also discussed its expectations that youth sports leagues have and implement similar policies.

2021 Annual Plan

Topics the Commission plans to address in 2021 include:

- PSMP implementation, which is expected to focus on improving the definition and understanding of available field hours in 2020.
- Review of recommendations from the FFWG concerning field fee levels and use of the collected funds.
- Increased interaction with all sports groups in Arlington and improved representation of their interests in Commission business.
- Ongoing impact of the pandemic on sports activity and options for increasing outdoor sports and fitness recreation.
- Actions taken by DPR and sports leagues to implement consistent and robust practices for ensuring the safety of youth sports participants in DPR and partner programs.
- Developments in recreation and travel sports in Arlington, including access and impact on users and facilities.
- Progress on various sports and recreation facility projects.
- Other issues that may arise that are consistent with the Commission’s role and charter.