

Prince William County Comprehensive Plan Open Space

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INTENT

The quality of life for residents of Prince William County is linked closely to the development and management of a well-maintained system of parks, trails, and open space.

A system of open space and corridors will protect water quality in streams and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay (including sources of public drinking water); enhance the ability of wildlife to find food, water, and shelter; minimize environmental damage from development on excessively steep slopes, floodplains, Resource Protection Areas (RPA's), or inappropriate soils; conserve cultural sites and scenic vistas; and enhance connections between neighborhoods.

Parks and natural areas can be used for recreation; wetlands and forests supply storm-water drainage and wildlife habitat; farms and forests provide aesthetic benefits to surrounding residents. And in rapidly growing urban and suburban areas, any preserved land can offer relief from congestion and other negative effects of development.

Open space provides a range of economic, aesthetic, environmental and recreation benefits to citizens of a community, beyond the benefits that accrue to private landowners. Open space enhances property values; increases municipal revenues; and attracts businesses, homebuyers and workers.

The Open Space Chapter provides policy guidance for the future of Prince William's open space. This Chapter includes objectives, strategies and recommended actions designed to ensure the provision of an adequate supply of beneficial open space, which is safe, accessible and enjoyable to this and future generations in the county.

The Open Space Chapter also includes standards developed to establish minimum open space and recreation facility principles. In addition, this plan identifies open space deficiencies, potential acquisition sites, criteria to evaluate acquisition sites, and includes implementation strategies.

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DEFINITIONS

Corridors:

Environmental corridors are continuous systems of open space. These corridors include environmentally sensitive lands and natural resources requiring protection from disturbances and development, and lands needed for open space and recreational uses. Environmental corridors include drainage-ways and stream channels, floodplains, wetlands, steep slopes, and other resource features, and are part of a countywide system of continuous open space corridors.

Heritage Corridors encompass linear swaths of land that connect or contain resources of cultural significance and may contain trails and/or roadways with interpretive signage linking cultural sites, are part of a countywide system of continuous open space corridors. The corridors may be historic routes themselves, or modern routes that connect sites of cultural interest.

Recreational Corridors encompass linear swaths of land or waterways that contain trails or offer other opportunities for recreation, and are part of a countywide system of continuous open space corridors.

Open Space: Land that is not dominated by man-made structures. It has been set aside to preserve natural or cultural resources, provide for passive recreation, used for cultivated fields or forests, or existing in a natural and undeveloped state. Open space may include nature preserves, historic sites, farms, parks, forests, floodplains, wetlands, etc., and may include some structures, parking areas, roads, trails and facilities that support the use of the land.

Protected open space: Land that has been protected in perpetuity by a binding legal instrument that is recorded in the land records of Prince William County. This instrument shall be one of the following: (1) permanent conservation easement held by a land trust or similar conservation-oriented nonprofit organization with the legal authority to accept such easement; (2) a permanent restrictive covenant for conservation purposes in favor of a governmental entity; (3) an equivalent legal tool that provides permanent protection, if approved by the county. The instrument for permanent protection shall include clear restrictions on the use of the Open Space.

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In general, Protected Open Space is made up of these categories of properties:

- County owned property: the passive recreation portions of county parks; recreational, cultural, heritage and wildlife corridors; specified historic and environmental resource lands;
- State and Federal parks, forests, and wildlife preserves
- Land designated as a Resource Protection Area under the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act;
- Land protected by enforceable easements or covenants that limit residential or commercial development.

Whether a specific property would be considered protected open space is clarified by the following examples:

- Existing state and federal park acreage in PWC is included (although it is recognized that some portions of these parks are dedicated to active recreation);
- The passive recreation areas of county park land are included; active recreation areas of county parks (recreation centers, water parks, swimming pools, golf courses, tennis courts, athletic fields, etc) are excluded;
- Military bases are excluded unless protected by Resource Protection Areas or appropriate easements, since the present and future usage of these properties is dictated by concerns other than providing and preserving open space;
- Home Owner Association land and utility rights-of-way would be excluded, unless protected by Resource Protection Areas or appropriate easements;
- Highway rights-of-way would also be excluded, since they are intended for future development rather than long-term protection.

Resource Protection Areas (RPA's): Land adjacent to perennial streams and legally protected from inappropriate development by the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act.

GOALS, POLICIES AND ACTION STRATEGIES

GOAL 1: PRESERVE THE EXISTING PROTECTED OPEN SPACE, MAINTAIN HIGH QUALITY OPEN SPACE, AND EXPAND THE AMOUNT OF PROTECTED OPEN SPACE WITHIN THE COUNTY.

OS POLICY 1: Complete and maintain an accurate inventory of protected open space in Prince William County.

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Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Prepare and publish a comprehensive inventory of existing protected open space, and ensure that the completed inventory is approved through the public hearing process.

AS 2 – Define and publish guidelines for calculating changes to the inventory of protected open space after Comprehensive Plan Amendments, rezonings, site plans, and Special Use Permits have been approved.

AS 3 – In order to ensure good public access to open space information, the Planning Dept. shall publish an Open Space Inventory Map showing parcel-specific boundaries of protected open space and make this information available as a Geographic Information System (GIS) layer on the County Mapper.

AS 4 – In order to minimize future encroachments, reduce the need for enforcement and ensure that current landowners, future landowners and county residents have access to the location and restrictions for all Protected Open Space, the Planning Dept. shall develop and maintain an online inventory of all parcels that qualify as Protected Open Space. This inventory shall identify the property address, Grid Parcel Identification Number (GPIN) number, number of acres, organization responsible for the long-term protection of the open space properties, such as the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, and the instrument documenting the level of protection.

OS POLICY 2: Consider environmental concerns at all levels of land use-related decision-making

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – On rezoning applications that include generalized development plans or on special use permit applications, require mapped and text information, in both electronic and print formats, showing the boundaries of open space areas proposed for permanent preservation. The Planning Dept. shall make this information available to the public in electronic and print formats.

AS 2 - Update the Environment Chapter of the Comprehensive Plan to require that the Environmental Constraints Analysis document the location of rare plant communities (identified by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation) and wetlands.

AS 3 - Update the Zoning Ordinance to clarify that wetland areas shown on the Environmental Constraints Map include tidal and nontidal wetlands, as well as wetlands that are not associated with Resource Preservation Areas.

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AS 4 - Update the Zoning Ordinance to require that rare plant communities identified by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation are shown on the Environmental Constraints Map.

AS 5 - Update the Zoning Ordinance to require rezoning and special use permit applicants to submit mapped and text information, in electronic and print formats, showing the resources identified on the Environmental Constraints Analysis that will be permanently protected as Open Space.

AS 6 – Update the Zoning Ordinance to ensure that new developments preserve public access to lands that are key components of the parks or corridor plans.

AS 7 - Update the General Development Plan submission requirements contained in the Zoning Ordinance based on this Open Space Plan and other relevant laws and regulations. The Planning Office will use these guidelines as a checklist for systematically reviewing rezoning and special use permit applications in terms of the data provided on natural resources and make these guidelines available to the public and applicants.

AS 8 - Develop and implement a system to ensure that all county offices involved in land use will coordinate with local, federal, state, and regional environmental organizations to facilitate the exchange of data and implementation of environmental protection measures and to ensure public access to this information.

OS POLICY 3: Manage and protect the open space owned by public agencies

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Update the Zoning Ordinance to require all county agencies, including the Park Authority and Service Authority, to complete and implement management plans for all property owned by the county. Management plans shall identify Protected Open Space areas and include information on how these areas will be managed and protected in the long-term.

AS 2 – Partner with state agencies (including the Virginia Department of Transportation, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, and Department of Forestry) and Federal agencies (including the National Park Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service) to complete and implement management plans for all public property to identify how Protected Open Space on state and Federal lands will be managed and protected for the long-term.

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AS 3 – Update the Zoning Ordinance to ensure that county-owned land designated as Protected Open Space, Trails, or Parks will not be converted to another use or sold. Land may be traded in some circumstances, provided a quantitative analysis is completed that shows the replacement land provides an equal or greater resource protection and/or recreation value to the public and/or offers greater access or connectivity to other park lands, facilities or resources.

OS POLICY 4: Partner with other government agencies, businesses, and non-government organizations, including nonprofit organizations and Home Owner Associations, to permanently protect open space and increase public access to open space areas.

Action Strategies:

AS 1: Coordinate land use planning with the recommendations of the Virginia Outdoors Plan, the Virginia Wildlife Plan, the Virginia Natural Heritage Resources Assessment, and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources' Cultural Resources Inventory.

AS 2: Coordinate land use planning with the plans for Quantico Marine Corps Base, Prince William Forest Park, Manassas National Battlefield Park, the Occoquan Bay and Featherstone National Wildlife Refuges, Leesylvania State Park, Conway Robinson State Forest, properties managed by the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, the Bull Run Mountain Conservancy, and other public sites.

AS 3: Coordinate land use planning with adjoining counties, the cities of Manassas and Manassas Park, and the towns of Occoquan, Quantico, Dumfries, and Haymarket.

OS POLICY 5: Identify county-owned land and designate such land for open space, where suitable

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Review county-owned properties and determine what county-owned lands should be protected as open space, and ensure such designation is made in official management plans of the Park Authority, Service Authority, Department of Public Works, Transportation Department, and other county agencies.

AS 2 – Consider using future "surplus" county rights-of-way or other county-owned lands for trails, parks, and open space, prior to determining if other disposition is more appropriate.

AS 3 – Establish an account in the Capital Improvement Plan for acquiring open space, including a category to track proffered contributions for open space acquisition, and will

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determine the feasibility of purchasing property adjacent to county-owned open space when such land becomes available.

OS POLICY 6: Retain existing open space in the county

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Preserve the current boundaries of the Rural Crescent, continuing the present policies that prohibit extension of additional public sewer service into the Rural Crescent and maintaining the 10-acre minimum lot size.

AS 2 – Review and implement programs, including the Purchase of Development Rights and outreach highlighting opportunities available through private conservation easements, in order to provide landowners with incentives to maintain minimum residential and commercial densities.

AS 3 - Review and implement programs which provide incentives for landowners in the Rural Crescent to preserve agricultural land uses, protect prime soils, and prevent non-agricultural uses from negatively impacting the primary land use.

OS POLICY 7: Increase the amount of protected open space in the county

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Task a county agency, including appropriate authorities, to negotiate with Home Owner Associations (HOA's), utility companies, and other private property owners to obtain appropriate easements that ensure permanent protection of open space.

AS 2 – Review the open space development standards in the Zoning Ordinance, including the rural cluster component, and update them to reflect the goals and policies of this chapter.

AS 3 - Identify Protected Open Space Overlay Districts where it is a priority to protect and acquire open space. Use Overlay Districts to preserve and protect valuable resources which have been identified by the community as needing such protection. Use Overlay Districts to recognize and map environmental constraints or amenities which should be taken into consideration when land development is being proposed. Overlay Districts will be designated in conjunction with those land use districts that are affected by an environmental constraint or amenity. Shoreland, wetland, floodplain, aquifer, and agricultural overlay districts are examples of overlay districts that have a direct benefit on the water quality of a watershed by imposing additional restrictions on the type of land use allowed within their boundaries. Overlay districts should also be established for wildlife preserves and corridors, and Historic and Cultural preservation areas.

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AS 4 – Review opportunities, including the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) and Purchase of Development Rights (PDR), and implement appropriate programs in order to provide incentives for landowners to protect open space in Protected Open Space Overlay Districts and to shift density to appropriate locations where existing infrastructure is in place.

AS 5 – Actively seek to acquire easements or fee interest in land property – through land purchases, grants, proffers, and donations – that is suitable for Protected Open Space, including existing open spaces, farms, forests, wetlands, natural areas, Resource Protection Areas, or where an Environmental Constraints Analysis shows that by-right development would result in substantial community impacts.

AS 6 – Develop and implement a process whereby the county can accept and enforce easements voluntarily donated or sold by private landowners, as authorized by the Virginia Open-Space Land Act.

OS POLICY 8: Manage protected open space to demonstrate a commitment by Prince William County to comply with the requirements of the Chesapeake Bay Preservation regulations.

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Map the parcel-specific boundaries of all Resource Protection Areas, provide those maps and description of Resource Protection Area restrictions to private landowners every 4 years, and make this information available to the public through a GIS layer on the County Mapper to ensure landowner understanding of landowner responsibilities and development restraints.

AS 2 – Notify new residents purchasing property with a Resource Protection Area, to ensure new landowners are aware of the Resource Protection Area requirements associated with their property.

AS 3 – Ensure that county agencies have sufficient resources to maintain the integrity of areas protected by Resource Protection Area designation.

AS 4 – Implement the recommendations of the Citizens' Resource Protection Area Review Committee to:

- A. Allow only minimal and virtually unavoidable encroachments into the Resource Protection Area areas, limited to low-impact uses. The list of allowable uses will not be allowed to grow over time. New developments platted after 1990 shall have absolutely minimal encroachments.

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- B. Complete and publish an accurate assessment of all perennial and intermittent streams and Resource Protection Area buffers in the county, and complete a comprehensive assessment of the county's watersheds to determine vulnerabilities, giving priority to those on the county's list of critical watersheds.
- C. Ensure that county staff has adequate resources to implement and expand the minimum erosion and sediment controls needed to ensure the maximum stream health in the county.
- D. Ensure all Chesapeake Bay Preservation Area regulations are adhered to, particularly the monitoring of erosion and sediment controls within 48 hours after a storm event, and that the county has adequate resources to respond in a timely manner when problems occur.

GOAL 2: IDENTIFY, PROTECT AND PRESERVE ENVIRONMENTAL, HERITAGE, AND RECREATIONAL CORRIDORS.

OS POLICY 9: Ensure connectivity, and encourage diverse forms of transportation, between neighborhoods/employment centers/transit nodes and open space that is accessible to the public.

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Designate a county agency to identify priorities for linking neighborhood to existing and planned county parks, linking neighborhoods to existing state and Federal natural/historic/recreational sites, and linking employment centers and transit facilities to county, state and Federal natural/historic/recreational sites.

AS 2 – Designate a county agency to provide convenient, well-marked, well-defined entrance points in and near public parks for access to trails within the park and to the environmental, heritage, and recreational corridors. Where possible, locate these entrance points at activity centers such recreation centers, nature centers, field complexes, public transit, residential communities.

AS 3 – Ensure, at the time of rezoning, site plan, and special use permit approvals, adequate pedestrian, biking, and equestrian access to the nearest local parks through environmental, heritage, and recreational corridors. Access should incorporate, where practical, existing utility and conservation easements, abandoned railroad beds, and existing or planned trail and/or greenway segments.

OS POLICY 10: Identify and secure viable wildlife corridors as protected open space

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Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Identify opportunities to acquire easements or property where wildlife corridors could be connected to similar corridors in adjacent jurisdictions.

AS 2 – Ensure that wildlife corridors, once established and/or obtained by the county, will be preserved in perpetuity in their natural condition as Protected Open Space.

OS POLICY 11: Partner with others to plan and manage heritage, environmental, and recreational corridors.

Action Strategies:

AS 1 – Support the efforts of State and Federal agencies to establish corridors linking public parks, forests, and wildlife management areas, and manage those areas in perpetuity as protected open space.

AS 2 – Actively seek new opportunities to work with private and public organizations, utility companies, and other county, regional, state and federal agencies to develop heritage, environmental, and recreational corridors.

AS 3 – Coordinate land use planning with the recommendations of the Virginia Outdoors Plan, the Virginia Wildlife Plan, the Virginia Natural Heritage Resources Assessment, and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources' Cultural Resources Inventory.

AS 4 – Ensure opportunities for public participation in developing partnerships for heritage, environmental, and recreational corridors, including planning and maintenance of the corridors that get established.

AS 5 – Ensure that all County agencies use best practices to develop and maintain corridors, including topographic standards, environmental concerns, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) access requirements, where appropriate.