

Subject: Comments on Parks, Trails and Open Space Proposals

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Dear Planning Commissioners,

The Community Coalition of Concerned Citizen Groups has reviewed the Planning staff comments on the draft plans for Parks, Trails and Open Space. We continue to support our proposal for Parks, Trails and Open Space Chapters of the Comprehensive Plan, as submitted to the Planning Commission.

We are disappointed that, despite significant community input showing broad support for high standards, the Planning staff recommendations continue to aim low, use confusing language that would hinder implementation, and minimize the need to provide parks in the more-developed eastern end of the county.

1. Public parks are areas of land set aside for public, not private, recreational uses. Including a credit for privately-owned parks (such as the basketball court at Old Bridge Estates) creates an illusion that sufficient parkland is already available when calculating proffers for future developments in the area. Local residents will be left without adequate facilities when private property is converted to non-park uses.

Counting land/facilities that are open only to members of an HOA as a "public park" ignores the reality that residents of an HOA will join their friends and use county facilities in other neighborhoods. Counting privately-owned parkland in the inventory of "public" parks covers up the deficit between existing vs. desired facilities, and limits opportunities to attract external funding for acquisition and improvements to local, public parks.

Also, please note that, at the top of Page 10, the staff revision misrepresents the citizen draft. We strongly disagree with the statement that "Neighborhood park sites and facilities should be provided primarily by HOA's..."

2. Acreage and facilities proffered for parks should not be double-counted as a school proffer. Public use of school facilities is very constrained. The Park Authority and the School Board should be commended for

creative management to provide some public access to school facilities, but proffers for new development should not assume the best-case scenario.

3. Limiting one-acre neighborhood parks to “urban” areas will leave suburban residents and others with inadequate services. In addition, "urban" areas are not clearly defined or mapped in regard to parks, so the full impact of this proposal is impossible to evaluate.
4. Parkland standards included in the Prince William County Comprehensive Plan, Park Authority Comprehensive Plan and the Policy Guide for Monetary Contributions should be consistent. The monetary contribution to acquire land for schools or parks should be the same.
5. Eliminating the 10% goal to match Fairfax County in the percentage of land managed as county parks, and offering no alternative metric, does not match the “aim high” vision expressed by citizens at public meetings.
6. Key responsibilities of the Trails Commission, including the review all land use development applications, should remain in the Comprehensive Plan. The details of the Trails Commission can be defined in a charter, but the Comprehensive Plan should include the major responsibilities, comparable to the guidance in the Comprehensive Plan for the Historical Commission.
7. Edits that called for action items just to be "considered" (i.e, changing "The Board of County Supervisors shall charter" to " The Board of County Supervisors should consider the creation of...") weaken the clarity of the plan and minimize the commitment to implement guidance in the plan.
8. Open space should be protected in perpetuity. Allowed open space uses should be clearly identified.
9. County-owned open space properties should have management plans that include a list of allowed open space uses as well as information on how these areas will be managed and protected in the long-term.
10. The County should develop and maintain an online inventory of all parcels that qualify as Protected Open Space including the property address, Grid Parcel Identification Number (GPIN), number of acres, allowed open space uses, 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.
11. All open space goals, policies and action strategies should be included in the Open Space Chapter, not scattered throughout the entire document.

Finally, a note about the process. As you know, the county staff has now developed four drafts to revise the Parks and Open Space chapter in the Comprehensive Plan. The Planning Commission did not adopt the first draft in September, 2006 or the second draft in January, 2007 after citizens objected in public hearings to the "aim low" objectives, vague definitions, and other substantial weaknesses.

Within 60 days after the Planning Commission took no action on the January draft, a Coalition of Concerned Citizen Groups began to prepare complete new chapters for Parks, Open Space, and Trails. We submitted those chapters to the Planning Commission on April 12.

At the end of July, more than three months after our submission, Park Authority staff identified about a dozen specific concerns. The Coalition of Citizen Groups incorporated the recommended changes from the Park Authority staff, and submitted slightly-revised chapters at the end of July to the Planning Commission. We presented information and answered questions at a Planning Commission work session on August 1.

We reviewed the three chapters with the Planning Department on July 23, with the understanding that the discussions would continue as Planning Department/Park Authority staff identified additional concerns. The citizen group declined a last-minute invitation to have one person participate in those staff discussions, because no single individual in the coalition was going to be able to negotiate changes in the citizen drafts, which were completed through a consensus process.

Instead of working through August and continuing a dialogue with the coalition, the county staff chose to wait until September 5 to release its changes.

Since we were allowed only one week to react to the staff-developed drafts prior to the work session on September 12, we have chosen to submit comments on the substance of the dramatically revised version of the citizen-prepared chapters. Thank you for the opportunity to provide our comments.

Sincerely,

Charlie Grymes and Martin Jeter