

# FAIRFAX COUNTY URBAN PARKS FRAMEWORK

## **Background/Introduction**

Fairfax County projects that an additional 245,000 jobs and 290,000 new residents will come to the county by 2030. The Comprehensive Plan for the County envisions concentrating this growth in areas planned for redevelopment and, seeks a balance between residential and employment uses. Such areas must be planned to accommodate future growth in a way that better utilizes available land and assists in the revitalization, redevelopment and reinvestment of our older commercial areas and transit station areas as they transform into mixed use activity centers, placing greater emphasis on pedestrian accessibility and mobility. Areas planned for more “urban-like” mixed use development include commercial revitalization areas, transit station areas, Tysons Corner Urban Center and suburban centers. Thus, over the next several decades, portions of the County will change to a more urban form that takes advantage of the synergy among integrated land uses and enables people to live, work, shop and play in close proximity.

The County’s strategy for managing its future growth and maintaining a high quality of life for its residents presents particular challenges and opportunities for park and recreation planning. The trend towards more mixed use development in our commercial activity centers brings with it new residents who add to the recreational demand in areas already underserved with park and recreational facilities. High land costs and diminished land availability are additional challenges to providing parks in many of the growth areas making it more difficult to assemble or set aside land for park and recreational facilities in these areas.

The county’s diverse park system contributes to its economic and social benefits by providing a high quality of life for residents. Currently, 80% of County households use County parks, are typically very active and participate in at least five leisure activities. Recreation demand and use trends in County households may shift over time and should be closely monitored so that park uses and user preferences are aligned.

The increasing urbanization of the County’s growth areas requires that the existing suburban park system in Fairfax County be supplemented by parks that are more suitable for the unique urban context and provide appropriate functions, uses, amenities, visual form, ownership, and accessibility to various users of an urban environment. Residents in these areas most likely will have little or no private yards due to more dense residential forms and will rely on publicly accessible open space for leisure pursuits, socializing, walking, jogging, biking, exercising, and enjoying natural and designed landscapes. Workers and visitors to these destinations similarly will seek safe and comfortable, publicly accessible spaces for leisure and social activities. Well defined and innovative urban parks can serve this diverse range of uses and users while also contributing to the placemaking of these newly urbanizing areas.

The urban park typology that follows develops a common terminology that can be used to plan for and develop parks in Fairfax County’s urbanizing centers. This typology also will serve to

clarify expectations for the community decision makers, and developers who seek to implement changes to existing development patterns and provide for park and recreation needs in these areas.

### **Urban Park Design Elements and Typology:**

According to ULI, in its publication *Parks, People and Places*,

“Design has an enormous impact on how users experience a park. Good responsible design yields a beautiful green, safe, clean park that will exert a strong positive influence on the community. The design of the park should be integrated with surrounding uses and should be accessible and appealing for users with a wide range of ages, backgrounds, interests and abilities. Features such as lighting, seating (both movable and fixed), restrooms, and food and beverage sales all contribute to the comfort and appeal of a park. Aesthetic considerations should not stop at the park’s boundaries; the perimeter of the park and the adjacent sidewalks are gateways, and are also an important part of the users’ experience.

It is critical for park design to remain current and to accommodate diverse users. Design options should respond to changes in community needs and in recreation trends. For example, adaptations in park design can address changes in fitness trends or in the demand for facilities such as dog runs or skate parks.”

The need to define urban park design elements and an urban park typology is becoming more critical in Fairfax County as development patterns in the County shift from suburban centers to urban activity centers. The current Policy Plan categorizes urban parks as a type of “local park” and characterizes them generally in terms of their relationship to adjacent land uses and orientation, their size, and their administration and access. Urban parks, however, can be further defined by features that differentiate them from traditional suburban residential-serving parks. Specifically, urban parks can be qualified by their unique park elements and design.

A comprehensive listing of urban park design elements is contained in Table 1 below. These elements describe where urban parks should be located and accessed; how they should relate to their surrounding context and land uses; who may own and operate these parks; how they will function, look, and be used; and what kind of amenities may be found there. Finally, there is a general description of service area and size ranges. Context and location are particularly important for defining urban parks and will greatly influence the choice of the other elements. Collectively, these component elements define what is unique to urban parks in Fairfax County.

**TABLE 1: URBAN PARK DESIGN ELEMENTS**

<b>Element or Aspect</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Context/Location</b>	<p>Urban parks are generally integrated into mixed use developments or major employment centers in areas of the County that are planned or developed at an urban scale. Areas in the County that are generally appropriate for urban parks include Tysons Corner Urban Center, Transit Station Areas, Suburban Centers, Community Business Centers and identified “Town Centers” or mixed-use activity centers. The context and location of the urban park can result in activating public or private uses located nearby and vice versa. Well-conceived and executed design is critical to the viability of this type of park. To be successful urban park locations need high visibility, easy access, and lots of pedestrian traffic.</p>
<b>Function/Purpose</b>	<p>The purpose and function of urban parks is to provide public spaces for human interaction and outdoor enjoyment in the urban context. Urban parks should include facilities that are pedestrian-oriented and provide visual enhancement, a sense of identity, and opportunities for social interactions, enjoyment of outdoor open space, small-scale recreation and performing and visual arts. Short-term, informal activities and programmed events during lunch hours and after-work hours are intended to foster social interactions among users, provide leisure opportunities, and create a visual identity to strengthen a sense of place and orientation. From an urban design perspective, urban parks also assist in breaking up the building massing and in creating a rhythm for the development pattern. Urban parks help to establish the character and identity of an area. Urban park functions may vary with features and facilities that range from social interaction and enjoying the outdoors to more active pursuits related to recreation amenities that may be included. Urban parks can also function as central civic space for community building activities.</p>
<b>Access</b>	<p>A key aspect of the urban park paradigm is that they are always publicly accessible, regardless of ownership, and are generally integrated into other public and private uses. Accessibility from the public realm, such as streets and sidewalks, extends the public realm into urban park spaces. Access is generally by pedestrian, bicycle or other non-motorized means and universal accessibility should be ensured. Urban parks should be provided in locations that are near transit facilities, trail systems and high pedestrian traffic areas. Connectivity among urban public spaces is also desirable.</p>
<b>Ownership, Management and Operation</b>	<p>Urban parks can be owned, managed, and/or administered by private land owners, community groups, public agencies and authorities (such as Fairfax County Park Authority, other governing or managing authorities or organizations), or quasi-public agencies and authorities (such as business improvement districts) or through joint public and private sector agreements for public benefit.</p>

Element or Aspect	Description
<b>Amenities</b>	Typical amenities within urban parks include seating, tables, street furniture, public art, trails, visual elements, display space, signage, water features, casual food service, focal points, playgrounds, gazebos, lighting, bike racks, pedestrian connections, special landscaping, transit-oriented amenities, and/or security features. In larger urban parks, amenities may also include recreational facilities such as sport courts, fitness stations, athletic facilities, and/or open lawns (natural or artificial) that can be casually used or programmed for sports or events. Other amenities that may also be provided include off-leash dog areas, garden plots, demonstration gardens, restrooms, parking, food service, amphitheatres and picnic shelters.
<b>Form/Visuals</b>	Well-conceived and executed design is critical to the viability of urban parks. Generally, urban parks consist of one or more intimate spaces or rooms, smaller than typical suburban parks and should complement surrounding uses, context, design, natural features and architecture. These spaces should be constructed of high quality hardscape and landscape materials that are sustainable, durable and environmentally sound. Urban parks may range from a single “room” to multiple “rooms” in design. Design should be consistent with design guidelines adopted for an area and should support transient, short visits and consider its appeal to a range of users.
<b>General Length of Stay</b>	Depending on the context, surrounding uses and amenities offered, the length of stay will generally be less than two hours, but could last up to all day for special community events or festivals.
<b>Size and Service Area</b>	In urban areas, park size is typically less than five acres and often under ½ acre. Service area is generally within a 5-10 minute walking distance (or ¼ - ½ mile) from nearby offices, retail and residences. New developments should provide 1.5 acres per 1,000 residents and 1.0 acre per 10,000 employees. Within urban, mixed-use development areas, a full complement of urban park types is desirable to create robust park networks.

## URBAN PARK TYPES

Urban park design elements may be combined in various ways to create a range of urban park types. Four distinct types of urban parks emerge from the urban park elements: pocket parks, common greens, civic plazas, and recreation-focused urban parks (see definitions and illustrations below). Urban park types range from the very small “pocket park” situated as a by-way on a pedestrian oriented travel way to a large civic open spaces that encompass many acres and diverse amenities and accommodates large community gatherings.

The four urban park types span a continuum of purposes, uses, sizes and features that can flexibly accommodate a broad spectrum of recreational and leisure pursuits in our urbanizing centers. Ideally, urban areas will contain a variety of urban park types in order to serve local leisure needs and support revitalization goals, and create or enhance an areas’ sense of culture, liveliness, and identity. The precise number, size and arrangement of the four park types in any

given urban commercial activity center should be determined as warranted by local conditions, adopted plans and in accordance with an urban park implementation process.

Ideally, urban areas will contain a complement of urban park types in order to serve local leisure needs; support revitalization goals; support environmental and sustainability goals; and contribute to the areas' sense of culture, liveliness, and identity. It is also important to pursue creative solutions to providing open space and recreation facilities in these areas. Creative urban park initiatives may include rooftop parks, unique programming areas, recreation facilities provided within commercial buildings, redevelopment at nearby existing parks and forging new park provider partnerships.

**Pocket Park** – Usually less than one acre, these urban parks are small-scale, open spaces incorporated into developments and designed for casual use by people working and living in the immediate area. A pocket park is designed as a single “room” to provide limited casual open space to enjoy individually or in social interactions. These spaces may consist of hardscape elements or lawn and landscaped areas, seating and visual amenities.



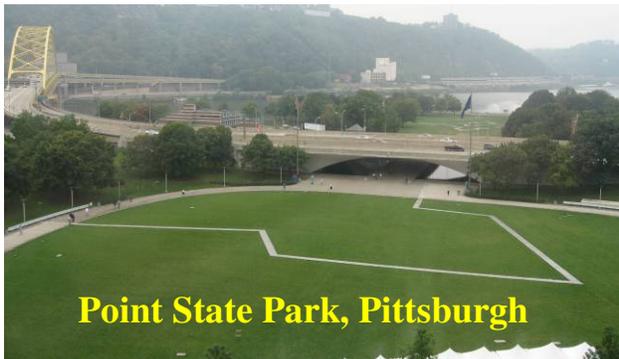
**Arlington**



**Paley Park, New York City**

**Common Green** – Larger than pocket parks, these urban parks include flexible open spaces with open lawn areas, serving as the recreation and social focus of a neighborhood or larger area. Size will generally depend on the context, function and area, but should be a minimum of one acre. Although a central lawn will be the main focus of this type of park, it may be designed with multiple “rooms” offering a mix of complementary uses and/or large enough to support multiple simultaneous activities. The Common Green could function as unscheduled open space for uses such as

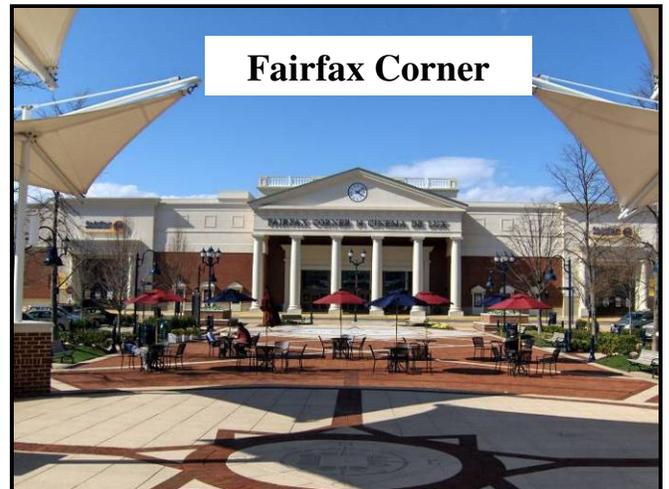
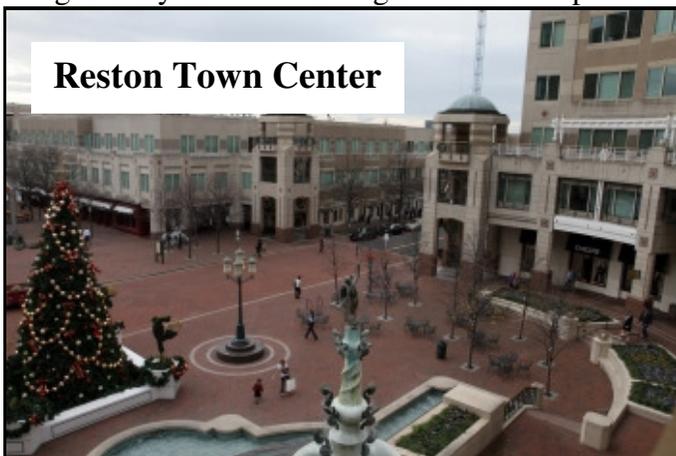
picnicking and unstructured play or be programmed for athletics, public gatherings, performances and special events. The Common Green may include facilities such as off-leash dog areas, community garden plots, landscaping, water features, shade structures, gathering areas, amphitheaters, space for public art, and/or hardscape areas. Recreational amenities may be incorporated as complementary facilities, but do not predominate. Examples of recreational



facilities include tot lots and playgrounds, small skate parks, fitness courses and paved trails, and sport courts.



***Civic Plaza*** – This type of urban park includes public gathering spaces set aside for civic purposes and commercial supporting activities. Civic plazas are usually located at the intersection of important streets or other significant locations and serve as a focal point and unique placemaking feature. Public squares that are surrounded by public streets are also an example of this type of urban park. Flexible, programmable spaces in multiple rooms are generally included. Design will include primarily



hardscape elements, but may include trees or other landscaping, seating, public art or water features. Size will generally depend on the context, function and area, but should be a minimum of one acre. Depending on size, civic plazas could support open air markets, summer concerts, festivals, outdoor exercise classes or special events. Recreation

amenities may be incorporated as complementary facilities, but do not predominate.

**Recreational Urban Park** – In densely-populated urban areas, recreation needs should be addressed with the inclusion of recreation facilities in an urban park setting to serve local residents, workers and visitors. This park type is distinguished by its primary function to provide recreation facilities for nearby residents and workers. Facilities such as athletic fields, multi-use courts and skate parks should be provided. Facilities could be scheduled or casually used. Athletic fields



could have synthetic turf and facilities lit to maximize use. Support facilities and amenities such as trails, seating, tot lots, shade structures, water features, picnic areas, restrooms, landscaping or hardscape should be provided to complement the recreational component. The size of the park should be appropriate to accommodate the recreation facilities located there.

The preceding typology attempts to define and characterize the typical range of urban

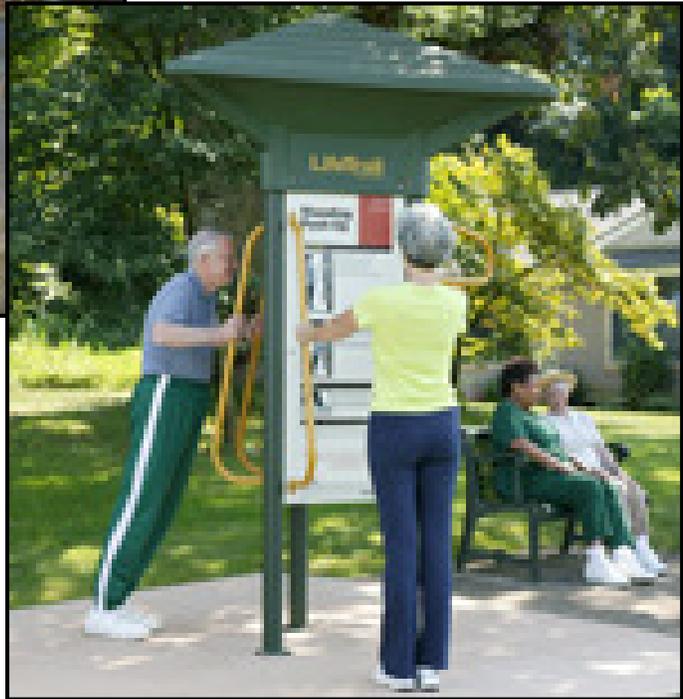
park types that have or will be developed as Fairfax County land use patterns and activities centers change and grow. Additionally, there are a number of supporting features that may share some common characteristics of urban parks, but which do not in and of themselves constitute an urban park. By themselves, supporting features should not be counted towards the urban park requirement when calculating the urban park contribution for an area.

## **LINEAR RECREATION SPACES**

Linear recreation spaces are designed for recreational use and are continuous linear spaces with continuous lengths of outdoor trails that are a minimum of 8' wide and may include amenities and/or design features such as trailheads, orientation features and wayfinding signage. Outdoor linear facilities are popular for jogging, dog walking, biking, walking, and/or general exercising. Creation of continuous linear spaces for recreation provides an important amenity that can be linked with pedestrian and bicycle street elements. The most typical facility is a Fitness Trail. Fitness trails are paths or courses equipped with obstacles or fitness stations for exercising or sport. A course should be at least a one mile loop with a minimum of 10 stations. Design considerations should include limiting of entrances and intrusions on the course and locating the stations in areas that may be visible but not at hazard from vehicle traffic. Stations may be located singly or in clusters. Urban fitness trails tend to be flat, to permit participation by users of all abilities, and to accommodate cyclists, runners, skaters and walking. Other terms used for this type of facility are parcourse or outdoor gym.

Linear greenways that utilize urban stream valleys for trails and trail connections are another form of linear recreation space.

### Examples of Outdoor Fitness Stations

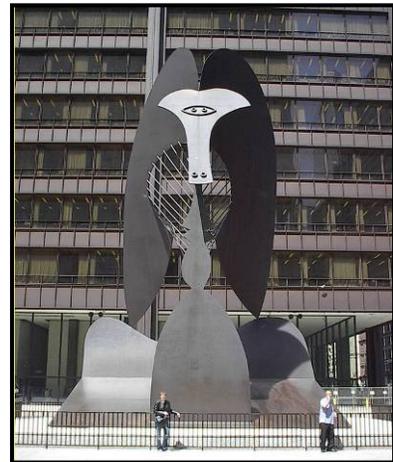


## SUPPORTING FEATURES

Urban design features associated with urban development often support the urban park paradigm but do not in and of themselves constitute an urban park. These features include streetscape elements that enhance the aesthetic and functional nature of the public realm. They often serve to connect public and private spaces. These features are generally required to be provided in any development or redevelopment and should be considered supporting features to urban parks and open space. A sampling of supporting elements include the following:

**FOCAL POINTS** – An urban design element that serves to focus ones attention and add visual interest.

**Visual Amenity** – A single statue, fountain, sign, planter, or work of art that draws attention and adds to the character or identity of a place.



**Gateway Feature** – Space such as a median strip, traffic island, or landscaped corner that signals entry into an area, creates the first impression of an area and usually contains one or more Visual Amenities.

**Building Entry** – Highly designed building entrances provide an identity or amenity that relates to the building and may consist of hardscaped elements such as an entry plaza and

stairs, plantings, seating and visual amenities. These spaces primarily enhance the aesthetics of the building with limited provision of public open space. Overall, these building entry spaces enhance the overall urban design rather than provide public open space.



**LINEAR SPACES** -These spaces supplement and, in some cases, link the urban park spaces. Many of these linear spaces are required for development, redevelopment or public infrastructure and are important in connecting and supporting public open space.

**Streetscape** – Vehicle lanes, medians, bike lanes, pedestrian islands, sidewalks, planting strips, street furnishings, browsing area, and trees associated with streets.



**Pedestrian Alley** – Mid-block hardscape pedestrian-only connection between buildings.



**Landscaped Connector** – Inter-parcel non-motorized connection surrounded by landscape plantings.



## GLOSSARY

To provide additional clarification of general terms used in this document, the following definitions are offered:

**Private** – Privately-owned and managed park or recreation facilities; open only to the owners/residents of that property.

**Semi-private** – Privately-owned and managed park or recreation facilities; open to members and/or paid visitors to a site.

**Publicly Accessible** – May be privately or publicly owned and managed; can be accessed by any member of the public directly from the public realm without a need for membership, keys, codes or access cards. Ideally, these spaces should be visible from the public realm and provided at grade for the greatest degree of accessibility. Can be provided on rooftops or in interior spaces, but careful attention must be paid to their design so that they remain fully visible to the public and it is clear through wayfinding features how they may be accessed.

**Public** – Publicly-owned, managed and accessible park.

**Shared** – Management and/or ownership responsibilities are shared between private and public entities.

**Rooftop Park** – Rooftops of buildings accessible to public that incorporate active or passive recreation space.

## **URBAN PARKS IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS**

Successful implementation of urban parks in Fairfax County requires a proactive and collaborative process. This process begins with a common understanding by all stakeholders of the value of urban parks in future growth areas, urban park terms, elements, types and supporting features. This collaborative process has begun with the drafting of this urban parks framework document. Putting this common understanding into practice will be a joint responsibility. The START team provides a structure for coordination between the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ), the Office of Commercial Revitalization and Reinvestment (OCRR) and the Park Authority (FCPA) in dealing with commercial reinvestment areas of the County. For Tysons and Transit Station areas, interagency collaboration will be essential and there may be other facilitating groups or organizations formed that will share responsibility for implementing urban parks.

In regards to urban parks and recreation in revitalization areas, Fairfax County will need to take a two-pronged approach. First, development or redevelopment in commercial activity centers will be required to meet desired park/recreation service levels using a methodology that is easily understood and supportable. Second, plans and strategies need to be updated, created and implemented over time to support and ensure the achievement of desired park/recreation service levels in our urbanizing growth areas.

### **Implementation Strategies**

The following implementation strategies are intended to facilitate a proactive and collaborative development review process; to facilitate defining and meeting urban park and recreation needs in urbanizing areas; and to explore additional financing mechanisms for urban parks. Strategies are grouped according to whether they can be addressed in the short, medium or long term

### **SHORT TERM (less than one year)**

1. Gain consensus by agency stakeholders of the value, inclusion and understanding of urban parks.
2. Incorporate stakeholder input and finalize the urban parks framework document.
3. Using the agreed upon final urban park descriptive document, ensure common understanding of urban parks as they relate to the development review process by all stakeholders. This should include cross agency communication at various levels and with applicants, especially in the early stages of development proposals.
4. Cross agency participation in ongoing planning studies, plan amendments and rezoning proposals to identify urban park needs and how they should be addressed.
5. Formulate a flexible process or mechanism to measure park service levels and implement urban parks in urbanizing growth areas. Possible mechanisms may include a point or grading system for achieving urban park goals and service levels.

### **MEDIUM TERM (1-2 years)**

6. Formulate a flexible process or mechanism to measure park service levels and implement urban parks in urbanizing growth areas. Possible mechanisms may include a point or grading system for achieving urban park goals and service levels.
7. The Park Authority should identify urban park needs in the commercial activity areas through various planning processes, including the Great Parks, Great Communities park master planning process, revitalization plans and special studies, Area Plans Review, and Out of Turn Plan Amendments.
8. Coordination via the START team will facilitate implementation of the agreed upon urban parks framework. Recognizing that commercial activity centers are more deficient in parks and park facilities than other areas of the County, the identification of park needs commercial activity centers may include identifying parkland and/or recreation uses to be integrated into the planned mix of uses and/or the designation of a central area that serves multiple civic uses including recreation and leisure functions. Such civic areas can serve as catalysts for revitalization.
9. Identify opportunities at existing parks where park needs can be met, supplemented or enhanced. Implement changes at existing parks through the proffer system.

### **LONG TERM (2-5 years)**

10. The Park Authority may need to update Master Plans for existing parks that serve the revitalization areas so that appropriate improvements and facilities are planned.
11. Funding mechanisms for urban park implementation and maintenance should be determined.
12. The identification and funding of potential parkland acquisitions or public land transfers within commercial activity centers should be strategically coordinated among public agencies.