

City of Alexandria Playspace Policy
Last updated: September 4, 2013

A. Policy Statement

The City of Alexandria will strive to provide opportunities for children and youth in Alexandria to achieve optimal health and development through the design, planning, enhancement and renovation of dynamic playspaces.

The Playspace Policy and its implementation plan provide goals and guidelines to improve access, quality, and distribution of playspaces through park design, transportation systems design (focusing on pedestrian accessibility), and incorporating the need for playspace in land use planning and development decisions.

For the purposes of this policy, a playspace is considered to be a playground, outdoor area, indoor facility, or site where elements specifically intended for children's play and/or unstructured recreation are located. This can include playground structures (e.g., prefabricated equipment) and the surrounding areas (e.g., open space, natural elements), as well as areas with elements that can be intended for play such as interactive fountains, gardens, art, and climbing fixtures. As such, playspaces can serve as stand-alone sites or can be creatively integrated with other elements in a site that serves multiple purposes and/or user-groups. For the purposes of this policy, access refers to the availability of playspaces, as well as safe and convenient multi-modal access to those spaces.

B. Benefits of Play and Need for Playspace

Physical movement and play experiences are essential parts of child and youth development. Movement and physical activity assist with the healthy growth of a child's brain and body—and have an impact on a child's social, emotional, physiological, cognitive, and physical abilities and behavior.

Play has proven to be a critical element in children's future success and helps develop muscle strength and coordination, language, cognitive thinking, reasoning, and social abilities. Play teaches children how to interact and cooperate with others, encourages problem-solving skills, and may promote executive functioning—a higher-level skill that integrates attention and other cognitive functions such as planning, organizing, sequencing, and decision-making.

Outdoor play and play in natural environments have particular advantages for children's development. Preschool children have the highest physical activity levels while engaged in play outdoors, where free play and gross motor activity in young children are most likely to occur. Playing in environments that incorporate natural elements affects psychological and physical health, with impacts ranging from enhanced mood and lowered heart rates, to improved social behavior and higher cognitive functioning.

For children and youth to experience the full benefits of play, they need safe space intended for play. Such playspace ideally provides opportunities for children and youth's intellectual, social, and physical development, as well as exposure to nature. Currently, many children and youth in Alexandria lack reasonable access to places to play that are safe, age-appropriate, and effectively designed to promote child development, especially in the West End and in Arlandria.

Furthermore, obesity is a rising problem in Virginia and across the nation. According to the 2010 Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance System, 32 percent of Virginia's low-income children, ages 2-5, are overweight or obese. For Virginia children, aged ten to seventeen, 29.8 percent are currently overweight or obese according to the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's Health by CDC (Note: BMI measures are only taken for children ages ten to seventeen in this survey). Physical movement is a critical component of addressing obesity and the accompanying health risks and complications, which can follow children and youth into adulthood.

C. Policy Goals

The goal of the Playspace Policy is to provide high-quality and accessible playspaces for all children and youth in Alexandria. The policy aims to guide the City toward that goal through calling for:

- The consideration of playspace quality, access and distribution for children of all age groups and in all areas of the City in relevant Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA) processes, including planning, design, and renovation.
- The consideration of playspaces in current and future land development and land use planning, including the systematic assessment of opportunities for playspace development and maintenance in development plans and re-zoning requests submitted to the Department of Planning and Zoning (P&Z).
- The consideration of inclusion of playgrounds in all new City funded projects that are intended for use by children and youth, unless the playspace is specifically deemed as an inappropriate component of a particular environment.
- The consideration of pedestrian and bicycle access to playspaces in planning and assessment conducted by the Department of Transportation and Environmental Services (T&ES).
- The engagement of non-profit organizations, community groups and private partners in efforts to promote, develop, and enhance playspaces, thereby giving other youth the opportunities to experience the benefits of play.

- The creation of incentives for private and non-profit owners of multi-family housing to provide and maintain playspaces for young children.
- Collaboration with Alexandria City Public School (ACPS) on enhancing, and providing access to play opportunities for all children on playspaces utilized and/or maintained by ACPS.

Within one year of policy approval, progress will be reported to City Council by the Playspace Technical Assistance Team (PTAT) recommended for establishment.

D. Policy Scope

The Playspace Policy broadly encompasses the play and unstructured recreation needs of all children and youth in Alexandria. The broad scope of the policy is intended to allow for flexibility in implementation and for the ability to adapt to changing playspace needs and/or demographics within the City.

The policy extends to existing and future playspaces on public lands, and on land held by private land-owners engaged with the City in the development process. To the degree possible, the policy encourages City engagement with non-profit organizations, community groups, and owners of private multi-family housing to encourage high-quality and accessible playspace for youth and children in Alexandria.

E. Funding Sources

Funding to support the Playspace Policy would come from the City of Alexandria Capital Improvement Program funds such as the Playground Renovation Program, and proposed contributions from private developers submitting requests for Development Special Use Permits and zoning changes. Grant funding from public/private partnerships and non-profit sources may also be leveraged when available.

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Background

Planning for Health: Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice

Communities nationwide are recognizing the critical link between our built environments and public health. How well we plan land use, parks, playgrounds, transportation, and residential and economic development has dramatic effects on our communities' health -- including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, asthma, cancer and depression -- far into the future. In the past few years, Alexandria has made great strides in planning for health, including:

- In May 2012, Alexandria City Council adopted the Beauregard Small Area Plan that, given the high density of children expected to live in that area, comprehensively planned for children's playspaces and provided for a greenway network.
- In May 2012, City Council approved a resolution to install signs asking residents to refrain from smoking in our parks and playgrounds.
- In April 2011, City Council passed a complete streets policy, which supports access to public transit and safe active transportation.
- In March 2011, City Council passed a breastfeeding support resolution that requested the City Manager establish a breastfeeding policy to support nursing employees as they returned to work.
- In March 2010, Alexandria became the second City in the country to pass a healthy food resolution that supported local foods, community gardens, and increased access to farmers markets through SNAP.
- In 2010, City Council approved of the City of Alexandria Strategic Plan, which, under the third objective of Goal 2, called to create a "Play Spaces for Tots" initiative to address obesity and overall well-being in toddlers and preschoolers by increasing quality play spaces.

Since its formation in 2009, the Alexandria Childhood Obesity Action Network (A-COAN), a workgroup of the Partnership for a Healthier Alexandria, has been a leader in bringing public and private partners together to better plan for health. The development of a Playspace Policy is part of a broader, comprehensive strategy by A-COAN to increase: a) access to recreation and awareness of places to play; b) access to healthy foods and knowledge of healthy foods and cooking techniques; and c) community support for breastfeeding.

2012 Alexandria Playspace Assessment

The 2012 Alexandria Playspace Assessment, commissioned by A-COAN and conducted by expert consultant, Design Concepts, found that playspaces are not adequately distributed throughout Alexandria and that the available playspaces do not adequately meet the needs of children of all age groups. Specifically, the Assessment identified the following:

- (1) There are key areas in Alexandria, in particular the West End and Arlandria, where there is great need for improved access to quality playspaces.
- (2) Of the 86 playspaces included as part of the assessment, 67 were identified as appropriate for children ages 2-5, but only 54 of those were available to the public during the day. School playgrounds including the playgrounds on ACPS properties are unavailable to young children during school hours.

In response to the 2012 Playspace Assessment, A-COAN worked with partners to launch Project Play, a community-based effort to expand play opportunities for all families in Alexandria.

City Council's Strategic Plan

The City of Alexandria City Council has recognized the importance of play and playspace, healthy child development, and recreation in its Strategic Plan, as outlined below:

Goal 2: The City Respects, Protects and Enhances the Health of its Citizens and the Quality of its Natural Environment.

This goal includes an objective to Support Healthy Lifestyles and Disease Prevention and establishes Initiative 3F: PLAYSPACES FOR TOTS

Create the "Play Spaces for Tots" initiative to address obesity and overall well-being in toddlers and preschoolers by increasing quality play spaces.

Measures:

- *Number of neighborhoods with usable play spaces for toddlers and preschoolers.*
- *Number of children using play spaces.*
- *Number of age appropriate naturalistic play opportunities.*

Goal 4: Alexandria is a Community that Supports and Enhances the Well-being, Success and Achievement of Children, Youth and Families.

This goal includes an objective for Alexandria to support quality, evidence-based initiatives that promote the well-being of children, youth and families and establishes

initiatives 4E and 4F regarding recreation and early childhood development:

Improve youth recreation and athletic field capacity and quality to meet scholastic and community demand.

Maintain and improve access to pre-natal to age 3 programs that strengthen families, improve birth and children's health and development outcomes.

Current Practice in Alexandria

The City of Alexandria has demonstrated a commitment to play and playspaces in many ways, including dedicating open space for playing fields, maintaining a large network of parks and public playgrounds, partnering with community members to build Indoor Playrooms, and constructing a Miracle Field, among other initiatives. The City and community's commitment to play is evident in Alexandria's recent recognition as a 2012 Playful City by KaBOOM!, a national nonprofit that encourages play in America's communities.

Parks and Recreation

The City, through the Department of Recreation, Parks, and Cultural Activities (RPCA), is a major provider of public playspaces. The RPCA Playground Renovation Capital Improvement Program ensures that City playspaces are compliant with Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) safety standards and are meeting user needs.

This program provides annual capital funding to renovate and to repair playgrounds to meet the industry safety standards. Approximately 37 park playgrounds are scheduled and prioritized for renovation on a 15-20 year cycle. Prioritization criteria include equipment conditions, usage, safety compliance, and accessibility. The renovation process includes site planning and analysis, design, public outreach and construction.

Current funding enables approximately 1-2 playgrounds to be renovated each year. Five percent of funding is reserved for emergency repairs or equipment replacement.

In addition, park operating funds also support a playground maintenance and safety inspection program. Preventative care and frequent inspections are intended to prolong the life of play equipment and surfacing, identify potential hazards, and to maintain clean and safe playspace grounds.

The Strategic Master Plan for RPCA, adopted in 2002, focuses on public recreation facilities and sets policy guidance for public playgrounds and playspaces. Surveys from the Strategic Master Plan and from the 2011 RPCA Needs Assessment indicate that playgrounds are among the most important recreation amenities to residents of Alexandria (behind hiking and biking trails and neighborhood parks).

Planning and Development

The City's Master Plan sets policy for future development in a number of small area plans and a few Citywide thematic plans (Open Space Plan, Strategic Master Plan for Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities, Transportation Master Plan).

Most of the City's small area plans were adopted in a comprehensive review of plans in 1992 and have not been significantly updated since that time. Most areas with significant development potential do have area or corridor plans adopted since 2000. These policy plans, in general, do not address specific play area needs.

The most recently adopted area plan in an area with a substantial number of young children is the Beauregard Small Area Plan, adopted in 2012. This plan calls for substantial redevelopment of existing apartment areas for higher density housing organized in walkable neighborhoods.

The Beauregard Small Area Plan (p. 67) addresses children's play spaces, indicating that outdoor play spaces for all ages will be provided in the greenway network, and that children's playgrounds are recommended throughout the plan area. The plan also notes that amenities such as spray parks and other water features should be considered for children's play spaces.

In addition, Policy 4.33 in the plan (p. 76), listing policies for open space, indicates that, "a minimum of one tot-lot will be provided within each residential neighborhood. Additional tot-lots and/or children's play area may be required as part of the development review process. Consider the use of additional amenities such as water features for the children's play spaces."